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PRUDENCE WETHERALL

I WILL BE GOOD

by

HESTER W. CHAPMAN

LONDON

MARTIN SECKER & WARBURG

1945

Martin Secker & Warburg Ltd
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THIS BOOK IS PRODUCED IN COM-
PLIE CONFORMITY WITH THE
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PART I CLOTHO

*"Le ciel difend, de vrai, certains contentements,
Mais on trouve, avec lui, des accommodemens.
Selon divers besoins il est une science
D'étendre les liens de notre conscience,
Et de rectifier le mal de l'action
Avec la pureté de notre intention."*

MOLIERE.

CHAPTER I *Introduction*

AT seven o'clock on a September evening of the year 1864 the lamps were lit in a London square. Blanche Peverence, who had been waiting for this moment, put on her bonnet and cloak and stepped out into the dusk. She hesitated, looked about and began to walk slowly up and down ; her head was bent : her hands were loosely clasped in front of her.

Although seemingly absorbed in some inward contemplation, she was careful to avoid the notice instinctively given to a woman still young and of a somewhat striking and prosperous appearance walking unattended at such an hour ; the square was nearly empty (as she had taken care to observe) and most passers-by gave no more than a glance at the tall solid figure, darkly and richly dressed, stepping between the streams of lamplight and shadow ; that her large pale hands were ungloved was the only mark of eccentricity.

As she raised her head and looked up at the lightless, uncurtained windows of the building she had just left, a man, stepping from his four-wheeler into a neighbouring house, paused to glance at her ; his uttered comment would have been uncomplimentary, for he had no use for strong-minded women ; his eyes rested on her only so long as he waited for his door to open ; as domesticity swallowed him up and the cab clinked and rattled away he was left with an impression of something odd, cold and immune, something almost unwomanly ; yet all he had seen was a big fair face between plain braids of light hair, a sable cloak and a severe bonnet ; the look of brooding reverie was lost on him. Blanche Peverence raised her clasped hands to her lips : the movement

was one of those generally associated with a violent change of thought or the effort to renew mental concentration. A single word was repeated aloud :—“Why? Why?”

The speaker now stood still with a look of horror and of understanding; she seemed to recognise whatever it was that her fearful thoughts had called up as she gazed at the narrow Georgian houses and the coloured figures moving between undrawn draperies.

At this moment a carriage with two elderly ladies in it drew up near her; as one got out she looked round, and said to her companion :—



“Is it not singular, Eleanora, that we should be visiting the very square? That is her house--number Seventy-Two.”

The second lady descended also and raised her lorgnette. “Very interesting—” she replied, after a prolonged stare, adding, “no curtains—she must have left, then. Let us hope we shall hear no more of the creature —” and they moved away together. As they did so there was a murmur of “Poor thing --” from the one and a firm “Don’t waste your pity, my dear -” from the other.

Blanche Peverence had listened to this interchange in a frozen stillness. She remained without moving long after the speakers had disappeared. So rapt, she did not hear voices of concern and apprehension, those of a man and a woman who, approaching the house from which she had come, caught sight of her standing alone.

They consulted together and the woman walked quickly up to Miss Peverence, who shrank away. There was a gentle murmur of “Come, dear Blanche—” and the three moved together towards the house at the end of the square, the tall figure between the shorter, more rounded pair. Now lights appeared at the ground-floor windows and the opening door released a flood of warmth and colour.

In the large fire-lit hall two substantial elderly maids were waiting; as their wraps were removed the women’s eyes avoided one another’s; the man, looking at the black marble clock on the mahogany mantelpiece, muttered an excuse and disappeared through a side door.

The two women walked upstairs together; at length, seated on either side of a huge dully glowing fire, they looked at one another in subdued and affectionate enquiry; neither spoke; then Blanche Peverence took off her bonnet and began again to walk up and down,

her companion watching her with a concern that showed a certain timidity.

She saw a woman who walked well but not gracefully, who looked pleasant but not alluring. She saw a clear, high-coloured complexion; features of the regularity generally described as Greek, with hair as traditionally sculptural in its blonde profusion and neatness; and a pair of wide, over-bright grey eyes, the eyes of an admonishing deity, which completed an appearance that was neither unusual nor disturbing. The mouth was firm and full; only a few bumps and hollows round the lips and chin and the startled arch of the fine eyebrows showed something other than the simple lady-like distinction that all the rest set forth, something ruthless and mocking, as if its owner liked now and then to laugh, not always kindly, at what the prominent alert glance observed.

At the moment she seemed unaware of her friend's anxious contemplation, as of the well lit, well-to-do "good" taste that surrounded them both. The carpets and curtains were modern and heavy, the delicate eighteenth-century furniture oiled and polished to a pitch that made it one with the general atmosphere of prosperity and ease. The windows were deeply draped, the mirrors and pictures thickly encircled, the books shining in morocco and calf, safe behind their glass doors—and it was at one of these that the moving figure stopped at last with a sudden gesture of her hands.

She was looking at her own name, repeated in gilt lettering on dark purple leather. *Miranda*, by B. W. Peverence, *The Ismays of West Harrow*, *Fast Bound*, *Lady Sybil's Choice*, *If Love were All*, *The Coronet and the Sword*, *The Osgood Inheritance*—these and others, filled two complete shelves.

Now she turned to look at her companion, who was emboldened to speak, although in a pleading tone.

"Dearest Blanche—you are worn out. Do come and sit down. Let us try—try not to think of—"

As Miss Peverence crossed the room her expression darkened into a sombre and acute distaste. She sat down and warmed her ringless hands at the fire for a moment without speaking; then she replied, with a singularly clear and deliberate utterance:—

"Dearest Cordelia—I am trying to realise my situation. The kindest action would be to help me to do so."

Cordelia Marchant murmured something that must have been familiarly phrased, for her friend took it up patiently.

"Alfred agrees with me. As my publisher, if not as my friend, he has given me some very good advice. I am resolved to take it."

Mrs Marchant hesitated and then replied, her bright round eyes still on her friend's face :—"You are going away? Surely Alfred admits that that is to put yourself in the wrong? And where could you go? You are so—" she stopped in some distress and in apparent self-reproach.

There was a short silence. Then Blanche Peverence said slowly :—

"I am in my thirty-eighth year, Cordelia. I am, as you were about to say, very well known, famous, if you like to put it in that way. Last year, when Alfred published my fifteenth novel I was able to invest his advance extremely well. I am prosperous; I shall soon be rich. If I never wrote another line, I could still live comfortably for the rest of my days."

"I am glad to hear all this, dear Blanche. Alfred never speaks to me of these matters, naturally. But I knew that the sales of *Miss Herriott* had been very—that is—"

Again Miss Peverence seemed to be sinking into a thoughtful oblivion; she did not notice her friend's voice dying away, her tearful expression. When she spoke again it was in a more withdrawn and muted tone.

"I shall be thankful later on—not now, it's too soon—that my dear father is not alive. He bore his own disasters with a fortitude I should do well to emulate—he would never have submitted to mine with the same firmness." Now, although there was for the first time a diminution of composure in look and manner, the syllables grew cool and biting as the speaker continued :—"Since the publication of *The Osgood Inheritance* I have had nothing but success and praise. That is not a healthy atmosphere for any writer, least of all for one of my principles."

"But you always—"

"I have not the artistic genius, Cordelia. I consider myself a moralist first and a story-teller afterwards."

"Should they not go together?"

"I think so, naturally. But this—suicide—yes, let us speak of

it, you see I am perfectly composed—has reminded me of what I had almost forgotten.”

“What, dear Blanche?”

“My duty.”

There was a pause. Then Cordelia said timidly :—“It seems so dreadful—so unfair—” but her companion interrupted her in the same kindly yet ruthless tone :—

“Unfair? To whom? Not to me.”

“O! dear—what do you mean?”

“People destroy themselves when they think they have come to the end—this girl found her life unendurable, and she could see nothing beyond it.”

“But that has nothing to do with—”

“Of course it would be intolerably arrogant to assume that I—that any creation of mine—could have influenced her, as they say it did. But all the same, her death has made me remember my responsibilities.”

“It seems so strange—she had everything—she—”

“You mean, she was an heiress.”

“Well—”

“When I was very young, Cordelia, I lived among those who had nothing—or almost nothing. Do you think self-murder was unknown in their world?” There was no immediate answer and she went on, in a less rhetorical tone :—“Misery and happiness come from within—they have nothing to do with circumstances. I forgot that, when I wrote the book that has disgraced my name, and yours.” She added with a dry smile :—“But I know what you, what most people think of my work—sensational—romantic—”

“But I love your beautiful stories!” Mrs Marchant exclaimed.
“Last year, when I was ill—”

“I remember, you read them all again. I was glad to know that.”

Cordelia Marchant did not listen to this murmured comment; she continued to speak with rising enthusiasm of her friend’s capacities; she soon plunged into a headlong excited discourse on her rights, her wrongs and her literary merits: and Blanche Peverence ceased to listen.

For a little while she inhaled the incense of praise; once or twice a sly, almost grim amusement glanced over her impassivity. She gazed into the dying fire and abstraction began to sink away

into memory. Imprisoned in present disaster, she seemed to be looking down a long empty corridor ; the show of faces drifted by, one pale ardent head above the rest—and she looked again, and remembred them all. . .

CHAPTER 2 *Father and Daughter*

IN the year 1839 the Reverend William Peverence, Rector of the parish of Upper Mellsham, gave up his living in the West of England and began to exercise his very considerable talents as curate in charge of a mission in Rotherhithe ; he was accompanied by his twelve-year-old daughter Blanche, since her mother's death his only companion and friend.

William Peverence had left Oxford in a blaze of distinction and honour ; then followed a period when he experienced the agonising doubts, the dark night of the soul which he had contemplated with pity and wonder in some of his contemporaries ; pride of faith, integrity of belief, firmness of character, all for a time failed him ; the young man sank into despair, as did so many of the brilliant and sensitive intellectuals of his day ; he recovered at last, more than ever determined to dedicate his life to the saving of souls. His father, the comfortable, fox-hunting parson of an already obsolete type, died at this time, leaving him in charge of his mother and four simple-minded, bustling sisters, who neither understood nor cared to understand their brother's ambitions and ideals ; soon the mother faded, bewildered and plaintive, out of life and the sisters married squires and clergymen as sensible and easy-going as themselves ; William, married to a Swiss inn-keeper's seventeen-year-old daughter met on a reading-party, whom he had adored, courted, swept into wedlock and then forgotten, found it difficult to adapt his principles to his position. He had left Oxford something of a ritualist : he had contemplated mission work in the far East ; then it seemed that he could best fulfil himself as a writer, and a stream of pamphlets, mystery plays and religious novels flowed from his pen ; but although he achieved some success, especially with the novels, such ebullitions seemed altogether too easy and

effortless ; he gave up writing, except for his sermons, condemned his own virtuosity, had a talk with his Bishop who was beginning to disapprove of him, and settled in Upper Mellsham where his daughter was born and his wife died.

For a time the gloom of the empty Rectory drove his all-embracing energies into the byways of a large and scattered parish ; he began, with the gay enthusiasm and winning humour that had made him so popular at the University, to apply his ardour to the country people whom for a time his gifts won over. But in two or three years he had done his utmost and was beginning to be aware of the kindly tolerance which was all that his efforts had aroused. Aware also of the cruel Old Testament morality that applied in this as in other remote districts towards frailty and failure, he tried to impose his own views in sermons and cottage visiting ; it was useless. To talk to his parishioners of casting the first stone was to speak to them in a foreign language ; his practical charity was accepted without comment, but his compassion for human error was a subject for censure and sometimes outspoken disapproval.

It was at this time, discouraged, aimless, lonely and embittered, that he turned to the education of his daughter. Something he heard the child say, some odd babyish turn of phrase, gave him the idea that she was exceptionally intelligent—as was indeed the case. After the wooden stubbornness of the peasantry and the oafish indifference of the upper classes surrounding him, the little girl's brilliant glance, her sly humour, her passion for letters and for his company, entranced and held him. In three weeks he had taught her to read by a phonetic system of his own ; a year later (at the age of four) she composed a poem for his birthday ; two years later still they were reading together the simple history of the Christian religion that he wrote for her benefit and that after his death, edited by her, became a minor classic. At nine years old Blanche could recite the whole of Herrick's *Corinna* and Darley's *Phoenix* to astounded visitors. At this time she wrote her first story (*Margaret—A Baronet's Daughter*) in a small fat copy-book illustrated by her father. A visiting governess gave her French and drawing lessons ; this lady's rigidity of outlook presently offended the Reverend William and he and his daughter continued their studies of French and Italian literature and their sketching and botanising alone.

All this time William Peverence continued his parochial duties in alternate bursts of ardour and despair ; the poor, as they were then called, liked him better than the gentry who found his erudition and his theories unpleasant when they were not incomprehensible. This did not disturb him, any more than did the complete isolation of his only child, in whose games of imagination and romancing he was an eager and creative partner. Very soon Blanche's reputation became almost as bad as her father's among those who regarded the privileges of wealth and education as a responsibility to be traditionally administered, not squandered, dropped or ignored altogether.

At last the crash, as Blanche's aunts called it, came, in the form of the usual village tragedy. The heroine, a blowsy and uninviting Magdalene, outcast and sullen, took refuge with the Rector, who employed her in his house and promised to support her child as soon as it was born ; this was scandalous enough, and the Rectory staff left in a body ; worse was to follow. Next Sunday, the Rector, preaching on the woman taken in adultery, was deserted by his congregation who shuffled noisily from the church as he gave out his favourite text. "Let him who is without sin" was already a familiar gambit and no doubt they had heard it enough ; the Reverend William, with white face and glittering eyes, continued his sermon for the edification of the deaf old parish clerk and his little daughter. The next day the girl he had befriended eloped, not with the father of her unborn child but with another local bad character, taking the Rectory plate and some loose cash ; a week later the thieves were caught and brought in ; the Rector refused to prosecute and again offered the young woman a home during and until her confinement. Complaints were made to the Bishop of the diocese who spoke, as it was euphemistically called, to Mr Peverence, with the result that he left the West country, never to return.

So at twelve years old Blanche found herself house-keeper of a huge, crumbling seventeenth-century house near the Rotherhithe docks ; her father continued her education between his struggles with a vasting floating population of gin-sodden roughs ; she now began to take on some of the duties of a parson's daughter, including a Sunday school class, a sewing-circle and a boot-and-shoe club ; overworked and poorly fed, she was becoming as resolute though

not as fanatical as her father. The difficulty of making herself understood by the Rotherhithe workers caused her to acquire at this time her habit of distinct and deliberate utterance ; her father's trick of torrential oratory, his excitability and thoughtlessness over practical matters, made her careful of her appearance and sparing of her words ; so, withdrawing at some points and uniting herself with him at others, she began to develop a demeanour that was in strong contrast to his eager unselfconsciousness of bearing.

In Rotherhithe at the age of sixteen, she completed her first long novel, a fiery, deeply religious effusion, neatly dovetailed into a plot whose ingenuity astonished her father ; somehow or other his theories of toleration and faith in human goodness had to be worked in : and this was the occasion of their first serious divergence.

The docile pupil was now aware of an internal authority in direct opposition to that of her father ; she did not know that her own judgement was making itself felt, forbidding the emendations he suggested ; she mechanically agreed to his criticisms and then wrote her own version. She secretly sent the story to a secular magazine ; it was accepted and published serially. The agitated girl waited until her first earnings were in her hand and then confessed her disobedience ; her joy and awe were sufficiently moving to obviate reproof.

The days of the Rotherhithe settlement were busy ones for Blanche ; but as it was impossible for her to venture outside the house after dusk, she spent the evenings writing. She produced her next work slowly, correcting and re-writing again and again. It was in this manner that she produced her first successful novel, *The Osgood Inheritance*, a few months after her eighteenth birthday ; this time her father read it through without suggesting any alterations ; his comment was :—"You are a writer, Blanche—you must give up your life to it. Only remember this—that if you become established, as I believe may be the case, you will have an enormous influence, especially over the minds of young people." Privately of the same opinion, Blanche said nothing ; she was now aware of a powerful mechanism inside her consciousness, sweeping everything she saw and felt into its jaws, churning it all out again in a series of pictures ; the control and direction of this process was an absorbing experience ; she knew she could work at nothing else. And when, after two or three disappointments, a publisher

accepted *The Osgood Inheritance*, she began to think of her next book in connection with its readers and thenceforward never wrote a line without an awareness of her audience ; they became a part of the machine and of its owner.

The Osgood Inheritance brought her a little money and no fame ; her next novel earned her an appreciable sum, though she scarcely knew what to do with it, so circumscribed was her life at this time. Then, at twenty-one, she wrote *Only A Governess*, the result of much bitter meditation on the landowning classes she believed herself to have observed during her childhood. The success of this third novel was immediate and sensational ; within a year it had sold ten editions, been translated into several European languages and made what seemed to its owner an enormous fortune.

Only A Governess was what is now described as a Cinderella story, the principal theme of virtue rewarded being amplified by an elaborate plot and a satirically drawn background of aristocratic selfishness and ease ; the religious flavour had been reduced to a minimum and the whole long novel was crammed with thrilling incident and ingenious turns and twists ; the characterisation was less formal than anything she had hitherto produced and a certain angry humour lightened the melodramatic conception and the crudity of the moral.

The tide of Blanche's career was now interrupted by her father's last illness ; he at length agreed to retire to the little house in the country that his daughter had bought for him. Here she nursed him for six months ; here they resumed the intellectual pursuits that his work in Rotherhithe had stopped ; here, looking back on the storm and tempest of his early days, William Peverence revealed all his heart to his daughter, his past disappointments, hopes and desires. He re-created for her his concept of oppression at the top of the social scale and ignorance at the bottom, of the spoilt tyrant feeding on helplessness and want, behind a whitewashed wall of respectable and Pharisaical charity that had turned him at last towards the poorest, most degraded class he could find ; without the humour of his earlier days, without tolerance or objectivity, he conjured up for the dreaming, unsophisticated girl a picture of shackled virtue and outraged poverty, "Fast bound," he would exclaim, his livid features lit with horror, "in misery and iron !" "I bring not peace but a sword—" was another of his favourite texts at this time.

Blanche was a willing but not always an enthusiastic or credulous listener. No doubt her father's version and her childish memories of their exile from Upper Mellsham remained the supreme illustration of all his views ; the foolish village victim with her mottled face and staring eyes became a martyred being whom he had sheltered almost at the cost of his life and the consensus of opinion that had driven him out the epitome of evil.

Her father's judgement of her responsibilities continually reminded her that she was a teacher and a guide ; but although he urged her to start a novel on existence in the slums of the Rotherhithe docks as she herself had known it, she refused ; he seemed to understand how full her head was of romantic settings, and accepted her denial with a word of praise for her independence of mind. He was compiling a memoir of his work in London and she spent many hours writing at his dictation ; as the book drew to an end his strength seemed to go with it ; soon he was sinking ; he suffered very little.

William Peverence's last hours of life slipped quietly away ; he was looking out at the sunrise, his daughter's hand in his ; suddenly he became restless. As Blanche bent her ear to his lips she heard him murmur a name long forgotten, her mother's. Then he looked at her and said distinctly, in his emphatic, headlong manner :—“We are to be *happy*—all of us”—and so died.

Ten years later Blanche found herself very happy in the wealth her books had brought her ; her fame ensured a large circle of acquaintances ; but it was not until she signed her first contract with Alfred Marchant that she found a close friend ; he and his wife Cordelia made for her a domesticity in which she delighted.

Miss Peverence did not live with the Marchants ; she took a house in the same square as her friends and allowed them to arrange the literary parties she from time to time unwillingly gave. One of her father's widowed sisters had been living with her for some years as housekeeper and chaperone ; Mrs Barrington or Aunt Adela, as Blanche's circle soon called her, was not the confidante of her rather impenetrable niece who seldom listened to her garrulous and repetitive conversation ; but the two ladies understood each other well enough.

Blanche became a respected but not a popular figure in the

Marchants' world ; she was too shy and too reverent to ingratiate herself with the great writers of her day and apt not to have read the works of her equals ; she was almost too good a listener ; admirers sometimes came away with a feeling of having been pumped.

From time to time she travelled on the continent, generally with Alfred and Cordelia ; no trace of these expeditions appeared in her novels, which continued to be placed in English upper and middle class settings. Blanche spoke little of her odd upbringing and of her father ; only once, in the course of an alteration in one of her books, did her belief in her moral influence transpire ; Alfred Marchant noted it with an amusement he now knew better than to reveal ; he had long been aware that she did not respond to criticism on other grounds ; that she should look on her gift for thrilling and entertaining as a form of social regeneration was nothing to him—so long as she did not overweight the mixture she knew so well how to produce.

"If only dear Blanche would marry !" Mrs Marchant sometimes exclaimed ; but her husband would point out that dear Blanche's quiet, lady-like exterior concealed a force of character that most men considered unsuitable in a woman ; she had had one offer since the Marchants knew her, from a rich Evangelical widower; this she had refused.

So the busy contented years went by until Blanche reached her thirty-fifth birthday and published her fifteenth novel, *Miss Herriott*. The events following on its appearance caused her to declare that it would be her last.

Miss Herriott, an orphan, is adopted by a wealthy and eccentric uncle who intends to leave her all his fortune. The story opens with the engagement of the heiress to a young man she has been brought up with since childhood and who also has been promised the inheritance of the uncle's business on the understanding that he marries the niece (of whom he is very fond) as soon as he is twenty-one. This arrangement pleases both young people, the girl because she is deeply in love with the boy, the boy because he has always been used to have his life settled for him. During the course of the engagement the weak and characterless youth meets and falls in love with an older woman, chiefly interested in the financial situation ; she ingratiates herself with the heiress whose peculiar upbringing has made her an eccentric and violent character. The

marriage takes place ; the rich young couple appear to settle down : but the unscrupulous siren turns up again and reveals the husband's emotional dilemma to the wife, who kills herself.

It was to be expected that among Miss Peverence's readers there should exist more than one hysterical young woman who would read her own story in that of the fabled heiress ; but it was a most unforeseen and unfortunate chance that one of these should be of a sufficiently exaggerated type to associate herself with Miss Herriot in her final act of abnegation. In real life the drama of suicide became a hideous and wounding scandal, for the protagonist was the daughter of a wealthy manufacturer whose grief took the form of writing enraged and vengeful letters to the press.

It was useless for Blanche's few defenders to point out that the suicidal type is not created in the reading of a single work of fiction, however powerful or appealing ; her detractors, of whom there were many, rushed into print, the booksellers and libraries withdrew all her books from their shelves and both author and publisher were in danger of complete social ostracism. Further fuel was added to the blaze by some of the former admirers of William Peverence defending his daughter with more ardour than consideration ; for a time her name became the slogan of "advanced" literary circles.

An enormous correspondence, much of it anonymous, began to flow in ; Mrs Barrington, terrified and inadequate, took to her bed : her niece, stubborn under the first shock, refused to leave London : Alfred and Cordelia Marchant stayed on to support her : and some weeks after the suicide the three friends were still together.

CHAPTER 3 *The Decision*

BLANCHE and Cordelia continued to sit silently by the fire in the Marchants' drawing-room long after the latter's voice had died away ; Cordelia's bird-like attention was never long held. She and her husband had been able to console one another in a mutual devotion ; now their care was entirely for Blanche ; they both feared a collapse or worse, some startling and conspicuous

action in her father's manner just as the scandal was beginning to die down.

Blanche had broken down only once ; but Alfred Marchant felt the moment approaching when horrified comment might give way to reasoned discussion. He stayed downstairs, forcing himself to go through the correspondence from which he wished to protect the two women ; then suddenly, as if coming to some conclusion, he selected a paper from the heap in front of him and went upstairs.

He dropped his hand lightly on Blanche's shoulder as he passed behind her chair ; he saw that the moment for his suggestion had not yet arrived.

"And how is Aunt Adela ?"

Ever since the news of the suicide Mrs Barrington's health was the subject immediately turned to as soon as the friends were reunited. A casual observer would have said that it was paramount in their minds ; only one of the three would have admitted how useful it had become. Concern for Aunt Adela was the leverage for the topic they dreaded and yet must discuss. Her state now occupied them for some minutes and then Alfred Marchant was able to pass to the next stage.

"I have heard from Howglass & Dwyer—" he began, "on the libel question."

Blanche's expression of composed endurance changed very little ; but Cordelia Marchant, watching her, was aware that her decision had already been made, irrespective of what she was about to hear.

"I won't trouble you with all their reasons—you can read the letter when you feel inclined—but they advise us not to bring an action. Hogg-Stanton was extremely cautious. He did not publish the letter his daughter left, merely giving the gist of it. Nor did the coroner refer to it, except obliquely."

"I remember that—" said Miss Peverence, "and I am glad to hear their advice." She paused, and then went on in an extremely gentle tone :—"The fact is that I have now had time to think over my position in this—tragedy—and I have reached a decision."

The Marchants exchanged a look of alarm ; for some days they had been expecting an announcement of this kind.

"I think I may now tell you—" she continued with the same deliberate softness, "what I intend to do."

They waited for her to go on ; as she did not do so Alfred Marchant cleared his throat and began :—

“It seems to me that if you have decided to go away—as I think you said—”

“Yes—I shall be leaving next week—” Blanche put in.

“Well, then—naturally you will want a rest as well as a change of scene. But I am quite sure you will also want to think of the future.”

“What future ?”

“My dear friend—do you imagine that this state of affairs is going to last ?” She looked at him without speaking ; his gaze shifted and he continued :—“Will you allow me to suggest what I had in mind ?”

“Please do, Alfred.”

“In a very short time your books will be as much in demand as ever they were—in fact I expect the sales to rise. My idea is that you should produce a serious, non-fictional work—and then follow that up with something more in your usual style.”

There was another silence. Then Blanche said in an even voice :—“What type of serious work had you in mind ?”

Her tone was mildly satirical, and the publisher looked a little confused. “I should not dream of suggesting a subject—that’s your concern—” he said, trying to speak in a light yet practical tone.

“I see—but before talking about the future, I should like to touch on what has just happened.”

“Well ?”

“I was telling Cordelia before you came in that I must accept some of the responsibility for this disaster.”

She was speaking in a low voice, her eyes on the ground ; in the pause that followed Alfred Marchant cast up his eyes in a look of despair that was almost comic, and his wife burst into expostulation.

“Stay, Cordelia—let me try to explain—” her friend interrupted, still with that deceptive submission of manner ; suddenly she looked up with a sly, doubtful amusement. “Do you remember that young man who came to read us his poems, and started each one by saying ‘Shall I bore you ? I think I must !’ I feel rather as he did. This concerns only myself—or rather, it did—now—”

She paused to acknowledge an encouraging murmur, and then

went on :—"Writers are ungrateful creatures. See what I take from you and Alfred—how much you do for me—"

"But we like—"

"I know—but however much I accept, there are some things I must do for myself. I have never, till recently, tried to evade my responsibilities. To people like you, my stories are entertainment, no more. But to the young—I have a duty, as we now unfortunately know."

There was an affirmative murmur from Cordelia ; Alfred looked at her rather sharply and folded his hands to listen ; as Blanche hesitated he said in a dry grave tone :—"Go on."

"A very few years ago I should not have allowed frivolity and arrogance to override my judgement."

"But you hadn't thought of the book then !" Mrs Marchant exclaimed.

"Dear Cordelia—don't you perceive how wrong I was to let my heroine destroy herself?"

Mrs Marchant looked at her husband ; he shook his head with a faint smile. Blanche continued :—

"It seemed to me when I was writing it, inevitable and correct in its context—now I know that I was only thinking of my own pleasure in a different kind of ending."

"But surely you agree that that poor girl would have killed herself without—"

"I think you understand me ?" Blanche interrupted with a quick glance at her publisher.

"I believe so. But I think you owe us some further explanation."

"Well, then—I may as well confess now to you both—and you can laugh at me if you like—that until I began to write *Miss Herriott* I never worked out the actions of my characters without deeply considering the effect they might have on the morals of those who read about them."

"But this girl only wanted an excuse—she—"

"I know that. But her death has been a reminder to me. I know also that the right course would have been to let my heroine contemplate the sin of self-murder and then turn away from it."

Alfred Marchant gave a deep sigh. Miss Peverence's tone became considerably cooler as she went on :—

"You consider this view the height of arrogance, of course."

"What else have you in mind for dearest Blanche, Alfred?" put in Cordelia rather hurriedly, "Should she really go away? Just now, when we cannot go with her?"

"She must do whatever she believes to be right," he replied curtly.

There was a short pause, and then Blanche said in a distinct, assured tone :—"I will think over your suggestions as to my future writing, Alfred. Now there arises another point. I am going abroad—alone."

"Without Aunt Adela?" exclaimed Mrs Marchant. "Surely, Alfred, you did not advise—"

"Yes, I did—" he interrupted. "Now that Blanche has made up her mind we can tell you. Do you remember Honoria Wareham, whom we last met in Florence?"

"That poor young widow? Has she—"

"She is no longer either poor or a widow—" put in Blanche rather drily. "She has married an Italian—Count Mazarotti. She wrote to Alfred from Rome, suggesting that I should visit her there for as long as I pleased."

"Rome! Blanche! How—"

"No one knows about *Miss Herriott* there," said Alfred, "so Blanche runs no risks—and she can have no better guide to Roman society. But I hope you have written to her, Blanche?"

"How good, how kind," Cordelia went on. "But then Honoria always admired your books, so it's—"

"I have written to her—" said Blanche, smiling, "I wrote last night and posted the letter this morning."

"O! I am so glad, so relieved!" exclaimed Mrs Marchant, clasping her hands. "But how we shall miss you—the children—"

Her eye catching her friend's, she was suddenly silenced : she glanced at her husband ; he said nothing.

Miss Peverence got up and stood by the mantelpiece, her smile no longer pleasant, but derisive. She said :—

"Did I tell you, Alfred, when you brought me her kind, generous, tactful letter, that I was going to accept Honoria's invitation?"

Alfred Marchant's face darkened ; he replied :—"No. It seemed to please you, so I concluded—"

"I have refused it—" interrupted Blanche, striking her hand on the mantelpiece.

"Refused—"

"If this is a disappointment, it cannot be helped. I have had much obloquy to bear, as we all have, over this business—but patronage, at least, I can avoid." She waited a moment: her look resolved itself into one of haughty withdrawal; then she added sharply:—"I think I can see myself in Roman society—*black* Roman society—under Honoria Mazarotti's wing, in that life of *mondaine* chatter, and odious artificiality."

"Really, my dear—"

"No, Alfred. I am going abroad, but not as a protégée or a hanger-on." She turned and looked at herself in the mirror behind her; when she removed her gaze something seemed to have given her further confidence, for she added in a much smoother tone:—

"Do you remember a suggestion made to me a week ago, by a family of the name of Desmarests, living on the north coast of France? That is where I am going."

There was an appalled silence.

"*To the Desmarests?*" exclaimed Alfred Marchant. "You're mad! You can't mean—"

He broke off, staring at her; his wife remained speechless: Blanche withdrew her glance from theirs. Then Mrs Marchant struck her hands together, crying:—

"To that man! Impossible! O! Alfred, she must not—Blanche—"

"I have written to him—he knows all the circumstances in which I am leaving this country—" said Blanche coldly, "and I received his answer this morning."

She was facing them now, her look severe and reserved. She added in a low voice:—"My duty lies there."

"And your writing? Your career?"

Miss Peverence paused; for the first time she appeared uncertain of herself.

"I shall continue with my journal—" she said at last, "I could as easily cease to breathe as to write. But I have finished for ever with what you call my career."

Alfred Marchant began to walk up and down the room; he turned to say abruptly:—"What on earth is driving you to this folly? Why there, when you could go to a hundred other places?"

"I am going where I believe I can be of most use."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't quite know how to put it—but you must see that I am in some measure to blame for—"

"Preposterous! A miserable hysterical creature chooses to—"

("Alfred—remember she is dead—" from Cordelia.)

"Am I likely to forget it? Even if you were the least in the world to blame, my dear Blanche, what good will your visiting M. Desmarests do, I should like to know?"

"I am not going as a visitor, but as an employee."

Alfred Marchant strode over to the bookshelf which he contemplated furiously for a moment or two; he had regained some of his composure when he turned to say in an acid tone:—

"I find you hard to understand, I must confess. You refuse what you please to call patronage from an Englishwoman—and you accept this—this—what can I call it?—employment—position—it is in fact neither—from a—"

"I was afraid you would take up this attitude. Forgive me—and let us try to understand one another. I have accepted M. Desmarest's offer as a means of finding—and trying to create—*happiness*."

"Come now, Blanche, what is at the back of this notion? Are you punishing yourself? If so, it's for an imaginary crime."

Blanche said nothing. Alfred Marchant afterwards complained to his wife that she fixed on him a glance for which he could have shaken her: he had seldom seen such a combination of reproach and self-righteousness. At last she said calmly:—

"Perhaps I am. It's hard to say exactly—and without pretension—what is in my mind." She added with a faint smile:—"You must not be angry. It is all settled. I leave next week for France."

CHAPTER 4 *The Arrival*

BLANCHE'S journey was uneventful. For the first time for many weeks she was alone and inconspicuous. She spent her first hours of solitude in a mental recapitulation of Jean Desmarests' history which she had collected from his letters to herself, a few newspaper articles and an ill-written biography which had been published in America in a *Famous Figures of To-day* series.

In the year 1828 Gian Dimaretti, a young Italian potter, left

his native city of Milan and set out on foot for France. The decline of economic conditions since the Napoleonic wars had had the effect of closing the works in which he had been employed since his eleventh year ; his parents were dead, his only sister had run off with a soldier and the girl he hoped to marry gone back to her Sicilian home.

The imprint of the Corsican legend still persisted in Austrian territory and turned Dimaretti's eyes towards France. He had nearly completed a process of glazing which he believed would give to unclarified earthenware a purity closely resembling that of "hard-paste" porcelain at a tenth of the current cost ; he had worked on this scheme since his sixteenth year ; now at twenty-five, its trial and further improvement were denied him by the moribund state of the local trade : so he packed a knapsack with a few utensils and samples and set off for Paris where, unsuccessful still, he nearly starved.

Several years later, after an obscure and unchronicled interval to which he never afterwards alluded, he had collected enough money to leave the capital and find clay deposit ; he now called himself Jean Desmarests and had nearly lost his foreign accent. A few miles inland from a northern seaport he found and managed to buy what he had been looking for ; he set up a ramshackle plant with a staff of eight workmen ; some years passed, and this outfit had greatly increased : very soon it became the first of the Desmarests factories.

Meanwhile the revolution of '30, the reign of Louis-Philippe and the ultimate establishment of the Prince-President caused some fluctuations but no serious sinking in the distribution of his pottery. The advent of the railways finally decided its owner's fortunes and the coup d'état of 1851 (which he helped to finance) saw him a very rich man ; he now had friends, or rather allies, in high places. He continued to buy the land surrounding the site of his original plant. He bought a manor-house on the coast : and he built a battlemented castle in the German style on a plateau of rock a mile from the shore. He owned newspapers, shops and land ; he refused all invitations to Paris save those of a business nature ; he was rapidly becoming the richest man in France, and the increase of his wealth was all that seemed to concern his energies.

During these years there had been intervals of private life ; he

sent for and married his Sicilian sweetheart ; she gave birth to twin sons who died in infancy : the third and last child, a daughter, was born in 1847. A year later Mme Desmarests was also dead and the widower sent for his sister, who had returned unmarried to Milan, to bring up the little Oriana.

In the spring of 1864 there was a breach between M. Desmarests and his sister ; he took exception to what he considered her over-disciplinary attitude towards his daughter, and this resulted in her departure from France. Oriana, now seventeen, had finished her education—so she declared—and must be provided with rather a different type of female companion—this was her father's view.

Certainly there was nothing in the mere outline of such a career to account for Mr and Mrs Marchant's horror at their friend's acceptance of the post of "reader and companion" to the daughter of Jean Desmarests : but they were with the majority of English people in despising and condemning the whole régime and personnel of the Second Empire ; not even Queen Victoria's rather belated friendship for Napoleon III and his Empress could recommend them to respectable and liberally minded circles ; in these, the name of Desmarests stood for all that was corrupt and vile in French politics in which they supposed its owner to take a much more important part than was really the case. His eccentricities and his collections were the subject of many biblical analogies : and his vast accumulation of wealth something too unpleasant to contemplate unless with mockery or vituperation—but what else could an Italian emigrant turned French millionaire have expected ?

From his letters it appeared that M. Desmarests had a clear notion of the British feeling towards him ; his almost life-long self-identification with the first Napoleon made it the inevitable and fitting climax of his power. There they were, he and the English, glaring at one another across the Channel : he found the juxtaposition suitable and diverting. Any advances he made towards notabilities in England were carefully calculated : he never risked a rebuff. His invitation to Blanche Peverence was a typical instance of presumption and guesswork ; he boasted that his intuition had become almost prophetic. He had long had his eye on his daughter's favourite author—at least, so he told her, when they knew one another a little better.

Later on Blanche became aware that Mlle Desmarests had a

passion for her novels and had spoken of them to her father : and later still she heard that Desmarests had in his turn received a complementary piece of cultural information, one of the many that he was in the habit of picking up from his secretaries, namely, that a popular authoress of the last century had been reader to the English queen. Associating himself, as so often, with royalty, his connection of thought had been quickly expressed and rapturously greeted by the bored, neglected girl. Much as he used to promise Oriana a new doll from Paris, so he now offered her a famous author from England, and in this way Blanche's wish for exiled service was realised.

Leaning on the rail of the packet, the sea-wind thrusting the veil against her cheek, Blanche watched the lights of the harbour twinkle out of sight, and felt as if contumely and argument were disappearing with them. She was not aware that she was happy, nor that for years she had been in need of an opportunity to sink herself in someone else's life ; in France her reputation was that of the writer of feuilletons ; as a paid dependent she would have nothing to do but absorb herself in the thoughts and whims of the petted child, the millionaire's only darling ; already she seemed to see the phantasmagoria of a new world streaming past her.

Sternly she reminded herself that she was setting forth in expiation and penance ; above all, her father's dying phrase was embodied in her dedication. She had failed in one trust ; she was assuming another with a deeply conscious humility.

Yet how pleasant it was to relinquish the effort of being at the same time famous and "unspoilt". She spoke in a high sharp tone to the stewardess, and felt the better for it immediately. On arrival at the seaport she was taken in charge by two servants in green and gold liveries who were to drive her to the Castle of Yssimbault, some fifteen miles along the coast.

As the tumultuous confusion of the quay-side died away and the coach swung through the streets of the little town and out into the country, Blanche put up her veil, looked to see if her dressing-case was safely under the seat and leant back, gazing round her.

Her first impression was that of being encircled in a gilded shell ; then she saw that the carriage was lined with shiny mustard satin, lightly embroidered with gold ; the buttons that secured the cushioning were of palest silver. The effect by daylight would have been harsh and unseemly, but the swinging lamp, shaded in mother-

o'-pearl, gave a mild glow that was rather pleasing than otherwise ; the result was neither glisteningly new nor certainly of an antique shabbiness, so that, although struck by a certain magnificence, Blanche could read little or nothing from what she observed inside ; in fact the decoration of the carriage had no atmosphere but one of prettiness and artificiality. Blanche had also observed the dash and style of the four-in-hand and the plumes and gilded leather-work as she had been handed in ; she found it all a little surprising, because, although she had expected display, it should have been of a more obvious, ostentatious type than this well-combined richness ; she could not see what she thought of as the pure elegance of the best French taste, nor yet the absurd vulgarity of new wealth ; it reminded her of something, she could not tell what ; in trying to place the recollection she fell into a doze.

She woke up suddenly with the feeling of having been asleep for a long time ; it was now quite dark and there were no lights to be seen through the curtains ; she pulled down the window and looked out ; the wind was from the sea, salt and cold. Then her glance caught the twinkle of a lighthouse, and as the horses paused to take the hill, she heard the sound of the waves—but was it in fact a lighthouse, that steady constellation ? She looked again, pulled the check-string and asked if they were nearing Yssimbault ; not yet, was the answer : the ferry was farther on.

Blanche shut the window and reflected ; anything unforeseen, even a detail of this kind, was now alarming. She wished that she could feel perfectly composed. Had Alfred Marchant been right after all ? She closed her eyes, in order to revisualise and to a certain extent repeat the spiritual inter-communication whose intensity had directed and informed her in this as in all other important decisions. A few minutes later she knew that she had been right ; but it was natural to dread the moment of arrival.

Suddenly they were going fast downhill, and she knew from the driver's exclamation as he flourished his whip that the ferry was not far off. The carriage entered a belt of trees, passed a group of shuttered and unlit houses, turned sharply towards the sea and began to descend still further. Blanche collected her hand-luggage and smoothed her hair and dress ; she had hardly re-tied her bonnet-strings when the horses were pulled into a walk and the door flung open.

She stepped out. At first all she could see was a group of men with a lamp upheld in the midst of them ; as they separated and came towards her she perceived that they had been standing in front of a high grated doorway ; beyond that were more lights, reflected in the shifting water.

One man detached himself from the rest and came to help her descend the steps. He was grey-haired and stout. Blanche received the impression of someone anxious to please, yet not quite sure how to set about it ; she assumed that her employer had come to meet her himself, and replied to his greeting with :—

“I am speaking to M. Jean Desmarests ?”

“No, Mademoiselle. His secretary, Philippe Relain, at your service.”

As he spoke he took her dressing-case, handed it to someone beside him and, murmuring something civil and apologetic, led her through the doorway where the passage seemed to extend itself into a covered, brightly lit corridor ; he opened a small door, gave an order over his shoulder and guided her inside. A few moments later she heard creaking and rumbling. Her companion—for they were now sitting opposite one another in what seemed to be a narrower, longer edition of the carriage she had just left—explained that in calm weather the ferry was worked by machinery. When the sea was high visitors were met by a steam-launch. M. Relain added something polite about English engineering, to which Blanche replied with an absent murmur. She was now overcome by the mystery of her surroundings ; nothing was as she had expected : she wished the arrival were over.

The lights of the Castle drew nearer till they seemed to penetrate the enclosure of the ferry ; then the machinery ceased its rhythmic pulsing. M. Relain got up, holding out his hand to Blanche ; they walked on to a jetty ; a chain of lights ran along it, looping away on either side. As Blanche gazed upwards, trying to discern some significance in the dim and soaring masses of stone, another elderly man, dressed in something between a uniform and a livery, advanced towards her with a more ceremonious bow than any she had yet received. After a short formal conversation she walked between the two men into an enormous cobbled yard, surrounded by battlemented walls. Others followed, carrying torches, by whose light she now saw that the stone ring encircling them was thick and high

enough to form an array of small houses; heads of women and children appeared from the narrow windows: there was pointing and staring. In the well of the theatre thus formed, striped in light and shadow, Blanche became the centre of a purposeful, masculine gathering, organised by the man in semi-livery who had announced himself as the steward of Yssimbault.

He now directed her towards a light basket-work carriage, drawn by a mule; there were four of these, as ornately decorated as the other Desmarests equipages. There were no drivers; the mules went up the winding road in their own version of a canter: they were led by running footmen who carried torches.

Surprised and discomposed by the inconvenience of this progress, which sent small hurricanes of flaming ash on to the front and even into the interior of the chaise, Blanche was at first too occupied in keeping herself free from the blown fragments to observe the quality of her surroundings. The ascent or street—for here, as at the foot of the Castle, she looked up at a curving line of slit windows—wound onwards with increasing steepness; soon the walls became higher, breaking into a more varied outline whose extent she could still dimly perceive; then the summits disappeared altogether: the windows became large and blazing.

The last and sharpest turn went through a long close arch, almost a tunnel; now for the first time, as they drove round a courtyard, she saw grass and the spiked heads of flowering shrubs; between these were placed ghostly and impalpable stone statues, imbued with an effect of stealthy gesticulation in the flicker and glow of the torch-lit scene. Then Blanche was handed out of the chaise; she was looking up at a double sweep of steps, culminating in a pointed doorway whose vast bronze surface was embossed in serpentine convolutions of baroque design.

The door now divided itself to reveal a row of red and gold footmen; they stood on either side of a large curtseying woman in black brocade. Thankful at the reappearance of her own sex, Blanche advanced. At the top of the staircase more curtsseys were interchanged and a moment later she was in charge of Mme Relain, the housekeeper, so Blanche concluded, though a more impressive term was used by the dark heavy-faced lady who directed her through a hall to another pair of doors.

Forcing herself out of fatigue and bewilderment, Blanche was

ushered into a high tapestried room ; the mantelpiece now appeared to her stunned vision to have the proportions of a cathedral façade : the chandeliers were upturned trees of crystalline fire, the carpet impaled the blooms of a tropical garden ; gilt and brocade swayed and shimmered as if under water ; the figures in the portraits swelled and diminished against shrivelled and mysterious backgrounds : each mirror held its separate world.

Once more Blanche was aware of a discrepancy, this time between the rows of lackeys at the entrance and what now appeared to be a series of empty rooms and passages. No maid, no majordomo was there to carry out that first impression of an extensive and lavish service. Then she realised that Mme Relain, who all this time had kept up a fluid murmur of commiseration and enquiry, was leading her through the first room into another, lighter in content and smaller.

And now, in spite of all she had failed to take in, Blanche knew where she was. This fragile elegance, these bibelots, this delicate white and pink and blue were the setting for wealthy and petted girlhood ; she had seen such shrines to youthful ease and beauty too often not to remember her own situation with regard to the inmate of this one ; it was what she expected : she was reassured.

Mme Relain announced her with a resonant severity. There was no reply, no movement : no light swift shadow streaked the pink walls or the white carpet. The housekeeper muttered something and rang a bell. In the pause that followed she tapped her foot and swept across the room ; she looked first through a curtained doorway and then deprecatingly at Blanche ; then, with a gesture of annoyance and a hasty excuse she disappeared.

A manservant came in, bowed, drew the curtains and went out. He did not come back ; nor did any other sound of returning footsteps or rustling silk break the silence, which was now total. Blanche stood in the middle of the room and waited.

CHAPTER 5 *First Impressions*

FOR a long time Blanche remained where she was, thankful at first for silence and solitude ; then a glance at the porcelain clock on the mantelpiece showed her that twenty minutes had

passed. Her instinct was to ring the bell : she recollected that the position she had allotted herself made such a gesture unseemly, and walked to the stove to warm her hands. For a moment her attention was held by this piece of furniture whose cream-coloured tiles reached to the ceiling and were engraved in brown and red with rural scenes and figures ; then she noted pink quilted walls, blue and gold armchairs and embroidered cushions, a pair of white Venetian mirrors and a gilt table ; this was strewn, not with needle-work or the apparatus for flower-painting, but with half-opened boxes of preserved fruits and bonbons ; now she began to have some idea as to the starting-point if not the range of her influence.

The other tables and the marble mantelpiece carried bowls and vases of lilies and orchids. Two empty and beribboned baskets lay on either side of the stove.

The room contained one other remarkable piece of decoration. Blanche had been prepared for what she and her friends were used to describe as Roman Catholic images ; she was now looking at a *calvaire* that had nothing to do with categorical definitions.

Fastened on the wall above a black velvet prie-dieu was a large oblong glass case, containing shapes whose colours seemed at first to be of an aqueous clarity ; a closer inspection revealed a set of minutely executed figures whose brittle angularities showed the concept of an early, almost a mediæval culture. Later on Blanche understood that this semi-opaque, miniature serialisation of Agony and Death was carried out in Nevers glass. The frail Christ drooped in crystalline fluidity : the rippled tresses of the Magdalene were as slippery as brown ice : the trees of Gethsemane were of a marine transparency : and on the face of each tiny being—none was more than three inches high—was scored a sinister and grimacing melancholy, an awareness of cruelty and despair that placed it in the age of mystical belief.

All at once Blanche realised that half an hour had passed since she had been left alone. She began to feel irritated and anxious : also she was hungry. She went to the door and peered down a long marble corridor. Then, still intent on her conception of herself as an employee, she decided to go and look for her prototypes in the hope of finding Oriana Desmarests.

She was afraid to open any of the doors lining the corridor, lest she should burst in upon M. Desmarests himself and be forced

to make herself known informally ; so she continued to walk on till faced with another pair of double doors ; she opened them to find herself in what appeared to be a small dining-room.

It was too late to go back ; she had shut the door of the boudoir behind her and was uncertain of finding it again ; she hurried on and opened another. Then she stopped. The rich aromatic smells that swept past her were accompanied by the sound of voices ; she seemed to be standing in a passage near the kitchens. She heard a woman speaking in the broad rough accent of the country-side.

"Indeed, you'll get nothing from me. I've my hands full with the supper for Mademoiselle as it is. Go along with you—get out of here !"

"But Jeanne—" interpolated a younger voice, "I'm so hungry —can't I have a piece of the chicken ?"

"Chicken—no ! That's for the visitor—don't bother me, I say."

By this time Blanche felt rising within her the indignation of William Peverence's pupil ; this attitude towards want was to be expected, perhaps : but she was resolved to protest. She pushed at the half-open door and entered the room where an elderly woman in bleached coif and apron was bending over a table ; a ragged village girl, still almost a child, had thrust her tousled head and hunched shoulders half-way through the open window. A wood fire was blazing : a chicken turned on the spit : there was a huge loaf of bread, a pastry and a heap of fruit on the table. The woman was mixing salad : neither she nor the child was aware of the intruder.

"Please—" the young voice insisted, "I've had nothing to eat since this morning."

"I can't help that—" the other replied in a curt but not ill-humoured tone that was more indifferently cruel than anger or violence, "You shouldn't be here—haven't I told you to get along ? I'll tell Mme Relain of you—be off, now."

The child paused. She was still gazing at the table covered with good things ; her face was half turned away from Blanche, but sufficiently lit for the Englishwoman to see how dirty and mischievous it was ; Blanche's first anger died down a little as she saw that the young creature was not starved or hollow-eyed ; unkempt and neglected she certainly was. Her wet locks stuck to her forehead ; her expression was one of earnest absorption as she looked at the food : her heavy eyes were dark with fatigue ; she stretched

out a small filthy hand : the wild head bent against the sill in despairing entreaty. The woman did not look up from her work as she went on :—

“The lady is here—you’ll catch it, if you’re not careful.”

“O ! I don’t care about her—she won’t stay long. I’m sure she won’t eat all that pie,” was the answer.

At this point Blanche judged it prudent to step into the room and make herself known. The woman turned round with a gasp. The child clapped her hands over her mouth to suppress a cry of alarm and jumped down from the sill, leaving the grimy marks of her fingers behind her. Blanche said quietly :—

“I’m afraid I have come into the wrong room. But Mme Relain left me alone so long that I—”

“O ! Mme Relain is doubtless looking for Mademoiselle Oriana—” began the woman in an aggrieved tone, “I was getting the supper for you—but you’ve been waiting ?”

“Nearly half an hour,” replied Blanche with a smile.

“Well, I’m sorry indeed—you’re the English lady ? You gave me a fright just now.” Before Blanche could apologise she went on in the familiar grumble of an old servant :—“No one told *me* when you were expected—the supper could have been ready this half hour. I’ll dish up if you’ll go back where you came from.” As Blanche hesitated, she put her head through the door and shouted :—“Jacques ! Jacques ! Here’s the English lady.”

A dark untidy youth, in a footman’s livery, appeared in the doorway ; as his eyes fell on Blanche he began to button up his coat ; the old woman said abruptly :—

“He’ll take you back—where did you come from ?”

Increasingly astonished at this nucleus of domestic informality in the midst of splendour—for the kitchen was small and cosy and the cook one that might have been found in any bourgeois household—Blanche prepared to follow the footman, pausing to say :—“I think I must have been in Mlle Desmarests’ boudoir.”

The young man said timidly :—“They’ve laid supper in the yellow room—shall I take Mademoiselle there ?”

At this moment the door opened again to reveal Mme Relain in a high state of flurry, and so relieved to have found her guest that Blanche’s apologies for her independence were scarcely noted. The housekeeper then interchanged a series of sharp questions and

answers with Jeanne, so rapidly that Blanche distinguished nothing but the name of her future pupil repeated in a tone of rising irritation by both women. Mme Relain was then about to sweep out of the kitchen, ushering Blanche before her, the footman preceding them, when she stopped, stamped her foot and exclaimed :—

“What are you thinking of? Where are the candles? Such manners!”

With an air of confusion the boy fumbled with a flint and lit a small candelabra which he took from a side-table. Blanche had time to observe that it was of silver, finely chased and fouled with droppings of wax from top to bottom.

They returned, not by the way Blanche had come, but through another series of halls and passages till they paused at the foot of a circular staircase and Mme Relain thereby showed her guest into what seemed to be a turret room, for it was round and a good deal smaller than the boudoir. The walls were of pale yellow marble, veined with greyish-green; the stove here formed simply a part of them, for its tiles imitated the marble with but very slight variations; the curtains were of dull grey moiré, embroidered and fringed with Indian red, the carpet a Spanish Aubusson, the couch and chairs covered with red and white *toile de Jouy*, the ceiling painted in grisaille with classical figures. On the walls were engravings from Watteau and Nattier and a pair of silver mirrors carved with hunting scenes; such character as the room showed was nearer the informal than those Blanche had passed through; she was silent with pleasure when Mme Relain announced that it was to be hers and that bedroom and dressing-room adjoined.

“Yes—” remarked the older lady, with a reassumption of her formal gracious manner as they moved towards the round ebony table, “It has the best view over the sea. You will have to imagine your cliffs, however, even on a clear day.”

At this point another, older manservant appeared with the chicken and the salad, followed by a young woman in fancy ball peasant costume; this plump and smiling creature was presented to Blanche as her personal maid; she helped to serve supper and then disappeared into the inner room.

As the meal progressed and Mme Relain was persuaded to take wine with her guest, Blanche, forgetting her fatigue, began unconsciously to fall into the gentle retiring manner that caused most

people she met to think of her as modest and naïve. She gathered that Mme Relain was on the point of departure from Yssimbault to join a widowed daughter at Nancy where her husband would visit them on his vacations ; she heard these plans with seeming interest and then attempted to lead Mme Relain back to her surroundings by apologising again for her departure from the boudoir, confessing to a timidity she had felt more in theory than in fact and declaring herself enchanted with what she had seen of the Castle.

Mme Relain received the last phrase as if it were a personal tribute and remarked that Mademoiselle was too good ; she would in fact find Yssimbault extremely barbaric when she got to know it better.

"This is not exactly what I should call primitive," said Blanche with a smile, looking round her.

"Ah ! M. Desmarests is a collector, as you know. Ten years ago he built Yssimbault in order to house his collections. They had quite outgrown his place on the mainland."

"Does Mlle Desmarests share his tastes?"

"He believes that she does. You will forgive my frankness, Mademoiselle, I say this unofficially, you understand—" Blanche murmured an assent—"But you will find you have a hard task in that quarter. Spoilt and neglected alternately—headstrong—well—" she stopped with a shrug and then added :—"We hear a great deal about English discipline from M. Desmarests—it is a pity he never applied it where it was most needed."

"M. Desmarests has been in England?"

"On business only. You may remember his negotiations with your firm of Wedgwood five years ago."

Blanche did not, but she inclined her head and Mme Relain went on :—

"He is a great admirer of your public schools. If Mademoiselle had been a boy she would have been sent to one of those."

"I see. But I understood that her education was finished?"

"She is a young lady—in years, but not in manners. Does one ever see her with a piece of embroidery or a paint-brush? She strums on a guitar sometimes—but she gave up the pianoforte when she was twelve."

"I sketch a little—perhaps I shall persuade her to accompany me?"

"Perhaps. It is all a question of moods with that young lady. But I have not yet even apologised for her. I was determined she should be here to greet you, and for that very reason—"

"O ! please don't distress yourself for that, Madame. She is shy of strangers, no doubt, and—"

"Shy ! That one ! Well—you will see."

There was a pause ; Mme Relain lowered her dark brows and deliberated. Then she raised her eyes and said shortly :—"It is better you should ask Jeanne—Mlle Oriana is always with her—but I think you saw her just now ?"

"No—there was no one but a village child, begging for food—" replied Blanche, forcing the reproach from her tone.

"Exactly—begging for food. That is one of Mademoiselle's habits, I am afraid."

"I fear I have not made myself clear. This girl, or child, for she could not have been more than fourteen years old—was of the peasant, almost the pauper class, dirty, not starving perhaps, but—"

Something in her companion's expression made Blanche's voice trail off into silence. She continued to gaze at Mme Relain, whose colour had risen. Then the Frenchwoman broke into a laugh.

"Mademoiselle, I told you you would find this place barbaric in the extreme, in spite of M. Desmarests' collections. His daughter is, I regret to say, the least cared for of all his possessions."

"But surely—"

"Her pleasure, or pursuit, as you put it just now, is to run about with the children of the island, barefooted and filthy, as you saw her. Her father is absent for weeks at a time, and she—"

"But she said she was hungry—" Blanche interrupted.

"Sometimes she spends the whole day out of doors—imagine it !—in fact she is always hungry—or greedy. The only way the chef can keep her out of his kitchen is by locking up the entrances and barring the windows on his side of the Castle."

"The chef?"

"The room you found yourself in is the little kitchen—still-room, don't you call it, in England?—where the preserves and pastries are made. Knowing that Mlle Oriana would be about, the chef directed Jeanne to prepare your supper, so that he might not be molested. He is lazy, and only cares to cook for Monsieur."

Blanche remained speechless, her instinct to draw out her com-

panion quite forgotten. Then, suddenly aware how unwise it would be to let the confusion she felt become obvious, she looked up and said calmly :—

“I am not likely to find her this evening, then.”

“I told Jeanne to get her ready—at least, to help her maid to do so,” replied Mme Relain with a grim smile, “I think she is curious to see you. I left her a message to join us as soon as she was dressed and—clean.”

“I see.”

“You take it very well, Mademoiselle.”

Blanche smiled, and gave way to the expression that in a younger woman would have been accompanied by a blush. Now the manservant reappeared with coffee. He had hardly set the tray on the table when there was a swishing, scurrying noise and the door burst open. Miss Peverence and Mlle Desmarests were face to face.

Long afterwards when Blanche, a very old woman, could be persuaded to speak of her life with the Desmarests, it was to this moment that she most frequently returned, to the first sight of Oriana as she stood, half impudent, half afraid, in the doorway, a footman with candles behind her, her glance wavering between scrutiny of the newcomer and the plate of sweet biscuits on the table.

At first Blanche was aware of waves of strong perfume, then of a waisted, swaying figure in a peculiar dress of silvery olive silk, high at the neck, tight in the sleeves, caught round the knees with a huge sash and flowing away in a fish-tail train across the floor. This style was to her so unfamiliar as to be grotesque. It was startling enough to see a young girl not yet eighteen in this mock-modest, deceitfully simple mode, and even more alarming to see the shape of wrist and arm and bust and shoulders through material that looked as if it had been painted rather than sewn on : but Blanche’s gaze was fixed on the diamonds that glittered in hair and ears before she began to contemplate the round pale cheeks, pointed chin, black curls and long light sleepy eyes that surmounted the dress. The dirty little girl of the kitchen was quite recognisable in glance and gesture ; the young woman’s lithe maturity had been hidden beneath a ragged country blouse.

Oriana rustled slowly towards the table, apparently aware of and enjoying the sensation she caused Blanche had a moment to

observe that not a single jewel broke the line of her dress, though her fingers were covered with flashing rings ; she stretched out a hand towards the plate of cakes, and then withdrew it, half turning her head, so that Blanche saw the short tilted nose and the sweep of the lashes ; the mouth was too large for contemporary taste : it curved now into a creeping smile as, reaching the table, Oriana put both hands on the top of a chair and looked from one to the other of her audience.

Mme Relain was sardonically silent ; Blanche sat still, absorbed in the contemplation of a bizarre and beautiful spectacle. Without complexion, features or style, as these words were then understood, Oriana Desmarests made her effect and compelled the eye with every turn of neck and wrists, with her gliding movements, her oblique and gleaming glance, her stealthy smile. Now she leant back a little, assuming a sly hesitation. Her short fingers with their grimy nails stole across the table ; then she said, speaking in strongly accented English, with a look that was partly daring and partly feline :—

“Can I have one of those ?”

CHAPTER 6 *Oriana*

M^{lle} DESMARETS' English had been picked up from her father's grooms ; it was limited and absurd. Nor did it ever improve, for she produced it for a purpose, well aware that few could hear it without being amused and beguiled. In the time to come she and Blanche habitually conversed in French, with the theory that certain hours should be devoted to the practice of Oriana's Italian.

Very little contact was made during that first meeting. Blanche did not underestimate the exigencies of her position ; she had already seen and heard enough to realise that whatever progress she made must be slow and conducted with all the tact of which she was capable. As soon as she was alone she faced the problem of Oriana's temperament as she then saw it, in the same way that she prepared to tackle some difficulty in the composition of a novel.

It was her custom in such circumstances to write down the whole situation in her journal and to make a list of alternative suggestions ; it did not strike her that to apply the same system to a human being was arbitrary, if not ludicrous. After a short sleep and an early breakfast she absorbed herself in the theoretical working out of this new task just as, ever since her Rotherhithe days, she had devoted her morning energies to the unravelling of the literary knots created the day before. In cases of extreme difficulty she had formed the habit of abandoning conscious thought and submitting her intellect to that supplicatory and ecstatic receptiveness used in religious circles, and then waiting for the consequent blankness of mind to be filled with a gradually solidifying plan. Sometimes the process was successful ; in this case the vacuum remained. When this happened in the conception of a novel Blanche was accustomed to cast the whole matter from her mind and to occupy herself with some practical matter. She had come to this pass by ten o'clock on the morning after her arrival at Yssimbault, and therefore found herself at a loss, for she had no duties, as she understood the word, not even a vase of flowers to arrange. She considered, then collected her sketching materials and asked her maid to show her the way out of doors.

It was characteristic of Blanche Peverence that she had been too absorbed in her immediate plans to see further than the inner ring of her surroundings. When Anne-Marie with many smiles and curtseys led her to the window and pointed out that the Castle was completely enveloped in fog, she was without an alternative. But the maid had had some experience of the English spinster on vacation—for this was in fact how the staff of Yssimbault regarded Blanche's tenure of her position—and, seeing what she had intended to do, suggested that Mademoiselle should follow her to the conservatory—perhaps the orchid-house would interest her ?

In a short time, after a journey of which she tried in vain to remember the details, Blanche was installed in the orchid-house. The conservatories ran half-way round the Castle in a wide glass tunnel ; walking there was the accepted exercise in wet weather. Extremely violent winds sometimes flung the spray as far up as the lowest panes, but generally the sea was no more than a self-contained pattern, moving far below. This morning it was neither seen nor heard. The pall of mist enclosing the Castle was impenetrable.

In the orchid-house the entwined and hanging banners of leaf and blossom were suspended as if in an opaque globe between sky and sea. From time to time the muted boom of the fog-signals or the padding footsteps of a gardener faintly shook the silence. The flooring stretched away before Blanche's easel and disappeared round a curve. She placed herself in front of a cluster of tongued and trumpeting pink and mauve, sharpened her pencil and resolutely turned her eyes from the intricate and distracting splendours that surrounded her.

Meanwhile Oriana had elected to spend the day in bed ; she opened a fresh box of sweets and sent for her monkey and her griffon, expecting at any moment to be able to ignore a summons from the Englishwoman.

Since she had clapped her hands at her father's suggestion of Blanche as duenna and chaperone, Oriana had undergone her usual change of caprice and had made up her mind that her freedom was over and a reign of tyranny to come. She had read a few more novels of contemporary English life as soon as the arrangement had been completed, and now foresaw herself subjected to a routine of needlework, parish visiting (Oriana did not quite know what this was, but imagined it to be something infinitely strenuous and dowdy) and the learning by heart of long religious poems. She was looking forward to boasting about Blanche to her friends and neighbours on the mainland ; but she had decided that a very few weeks would suffice to make her post as intolerable to this Englishwoman as it had to her predecessors ; then Oriana would be free to torment the servants, bully or cajole the island youths, and eat as many sweets as she pleased.

Nevertheless there had been something in the newcomer's eye last night that did not quite co-ordinate with these pleasing intentions, something resilient, and—could it be?—mocking : not the indulgent mockery that generally greeted Oriana's little ways, but something harder and more self-contained.

At this point in Oriana's musings the star-shaped clock over the pseudo-Empire bed struck eleven, and she sat up and tugged at the bell. A maid came running. Where was the Englishwoman ? demanded Oriana indignantly, pushing monkey and griffon to the floor.

In the orchid-house ? *Sketching* ! Oriana hurried into a dressing-

gown and slippers. In a few moments she was far from her own wing, running through halls and corridors until she reached the conservatory. There sat Miss Peverence, as coolly intent as if the place belonged to her.

Oriana Desmarest had long taken for granted the curious, the exotic and the rare ; these appetites had been cultivated by her father's exuberant and catholic taste. So the spectacle, partly pleasing and partly ridiculous, of Blanche at her easel, in grey merino with collar and cuffs of white lawn, her severe profile outlined against the confused and sulphureous colours of the orchid-house, had its effect on the girl who had been a critic of effects before her childhood was over. The steady hand, the composed and careful glance, the suggestion of character and force in the quiet upright figure caught Oriana's imagination ; she watched and waited, her fancy held. Then the sense of frustration came back ; she opened the glass doors and banged them behind her. Now only a few yards separated her from her quarry.

Miss Peverence did not look round. Oriana drew a little nearer and perceived, rather to her relief, that the drawing had no particular strength ; it was the careful outline of an amateur, no more. She gathered her silk-lined muslin robe about her and muttered something that was meant as a derisive aside.

"Good morning—" replied Blanche, contemplating her sketch in a cheerful manner. The drawing was finished ; the artist got out her colour-box and began to "wash in" the background.

Oriana felt herself growing crimson with annoyance ; she said in a rough tone :—

"Your drawing is all wrong. Those tendrils don't grow in the way you've put them."

There was a pause while Miss Peverence replaced the colour-box and leant forward to scrutinise her work.

"Quite right—" she said in an even voice, adding, "There is a thicker ring between the petal and the stem ? Is not that what you mean ?"

"I can't draw—" replied the sulky childish voice, now at her elbow.

Blanche got out her indiarubber and occupied herself with the alteration. Then she turned and said with a smile :—"Thank you, Mademoiselle."

Oriana's looks were of the varying kind ; this was not one of her good days. Her pale round face had been mottled with cold and was now suffused with a dull unbecoming flush from the damp heat of the conservatory ; her eyes were half-closed, her full lower lip thrust out. Her hands were sticky and not very clean ; only neck and bosom held the creamy glow that Blanche had noticed the evening before. Now Oriana hunched the white frills over her shoulders and picked at one of the black velvet ribbons that knotted her gown from throat to ankle, refusing to meet Blanche's glance.

The background of the sketch was dry ; Blanche began to work on the stems of the orchid. Oriana continued to watch in lowering disapproval.

"Have you any hand-painted gowns, Mademoiselle ? Perhaps they are not fashionable for young French girls."

"I could have them if I wanted," replied Oriana, immediately stung, "I have only to ask my father, and I could have as many from Paris as I pleased."

"Ah—but that would take time, I suppose?"

"Not very long—at least—"

"I only ask because when one of my cousins was married the other day she had a pink satin ball-dress, painted with bluebells and anemones. The effect was charming."

"Pink and blue ! That's English taste."

"O ! of course a simple satin gown can be painted with any sprays or wreaths. One of the pleasures is to be able to choose."

"Who painted your cousin's? Did she send to Paris?"

"No—she could not afford that."

"Who did, then ? Did she?"

"No, she was too busy—and too nervous. I painted it for her. It was all done in one afternoon and she was able to wear it the next day."

There was a long silence. Blanche began to apply herself to the orchid.

"This would look very beautiful on the hem of a dress—" she remarked after a while.

"It would have to be formal to be right," said Oriana quickly, "Natural sprays would not do at all."

"Not on a ball-dress perhaps."

"Not at all—they should be flat and stiff."

"I daresay you are right."

There ensued a very long silence indeed.

"I have an eau-de-nil satin dinner dress," said Oriana at last in an indifferent tone, "If it were painted, I should like it to be with orchids."

"What a pity that it takes such a long time to do!"

Oriana emitted a sound between a snort and a giggle. Miss Peverence now began to paint the pistils and interior shadows of her spray.

"Couldn't you paint it for me?" said Oriana finally, in a voice that hovered between the casual and the infantine.

Blanche waited till she had dealt with the foreground of another interior before replying. "Certainly," she said in a brisk tone, "If I stay here, that is. I should not care to waste the time over it otherwise."

"Stay here?"

"You see, I could not help hearing that you did not expect me to do so."

"You could stay till you were tired of it," said Oriana, now smiling openly, and she added with an air of having scored a point, "I thought you couldn't go back to England because of that girl who committed suicide."

Very deliberately Miss Peverence washed her brush, dried her fingers and turned to face Oriana. Her look was neither pained nor angry, but coolly observant and slightly surprised, as if she were saying, "Let me see what kind of a creature it is who says such things." The girl crimsoned, shuffled her feet and stared back defiantly. The Englishwoman's eye travelled to Oriana's bare ankles and up again in the same detached manner. Then she turned back to her painting as if nothing had passed between them. A moment later Oriana disappeared.

They did not meet again till dinner-time. As Blanche and Mme Relain took their seats at either end of the table in the small dining-room, Oriana appeared in the dirty blue blouse of their first meeting; she ate fast and noisily, only pausing to give orders to the footmen or to contradict Mme Relain, who supported her behaviour with the sardonic resignation that seemed her most frequent defence. Blanche said little; as they were sitting over coffee Oriana got up

suddenly and ran out of the room. She was not seen again for the rest of that day.

During the hours that followed Blanche considered her failure ; it was a pity that the bait of the painted gown had been nibbled at and then abandoned. She forgot to wonder when she would set eyes on the father in her attempted re-assessment of the daughter's attitude. It was too easy to dwell on the ungracious manners, the childish whim that had at first demanded her presence and then rejected it—but against these recollections there was the growing resolve to succeed in the task she had set herself. She remembered her vows and asked for a renewal of determination.

It was symbolic and encouraging that at this point the fog lifted. As a rule Blanche paid little heed to coincidence, but the sudden disappearance of that enveloping shroud seemed to throw a more normal light on everything. She put on a bonnet and mantle and went out to inspect the Castle.

It was not possible to take in the outward structure in a single tour, however exhaustive ; some weeks went by and many walks were taken before Blanche could see in her mind's eye this piling of a residence on top of a village in a series of half-circles that, while constantly broken, yet fitted into a design that reminded her a little of the great double staircase at Chambord.

The whole building was carried out in a yellowish-grey stone which did not perhaps lend itself very well to the hinted delicacy which characterised the chapel and the banqueting-hall ; the architect, a Bavarian protégé of Queen Victoria's, had made this single concession to French elegance and then released his own touch of lightness in the tiles which were of a pale shiny mustard, so that when the sun caught them the roofs and turrets turned to sheets of gold. For the rest the Castle was solid, heavy and a little absurd, yet not without grandeur and a certain dramatic appeal, the appeal of German ballads and fairy-tales. The original rock on which it had been placed, with its lichens and seaweeds and perching gulls, made a coloured setting for the uniformity of the whole. There was something naive and triumphant about the way it settled into rather than soared from its base.

Blanche returned to her rooms, touched up her sketch and wrote in her journal. She was sitting down to supper alone when Oriana's voice was heard on the stairs. Blanche called to her to come in ;

she did so with hesitation. She was bare-footed, wet through and dirtier than ever. With a furtive look she glided over to the stove. Blanche continued her meal for a moment or two without speaking. Then she said :—

“You must be very hungry, Mademoiselle, if you have had nothing to eat since I last saw you.”

There was an affirmative murmur. Blanche cut a large slice of the pie that had been set in front of her, put it on a plate and directed the footman to place it before Oriana, who sat down and began to eat in her usual noisy and precipitate manner, glancing at Blanche from time to time. Then she said, as if in unwilling concession :—

“It’s raining again.”

“I imagine there has been a good deal of rain lately?” replied Blanche in a conversational tone, glancing at Oriana’s costume.

“O! I always wear this when my father isn’t expected—it’s more comfortable.”

“Do you expect him back soon?”

Oriana stared. “He only comes here once a fortnight—he’s got a house near the factory—” she said in a surprised tone.

“I see—” replied Blanche, and silence fell.

Oriana finished her plateful and leaned back, stretching her arms over her head with a long sigh.

“Some cake and fruit?” suggested Blanche, pointing to the dishes, but the girl shook her head.

“You’ll have some coffee when it comes?” Blanche pursued.

“I only drink tisane and chocolate,” was the gruff answer.

“Cannot some be made for you?”

Oriana consented. When both chocolate and coffee were on the table and the servants had left the room she flung her hair back and said defiantly :—

“I always have chocolate with my father in the evenings when he’s here—he likes me to be alone with him.”

“And you don’t know when he’s coming?”

“O—” Oriana paused and smiled—“Arnaud in the village generally hears and tells me. Then I have time to dress up before he comes.”

“Is Arnaud one of the island children?”

“Yes—we call it the village. He’s not a child—he’s eighteen.”

Blanche stirred her coffee and said casually :—"I suppose you have a great many friends in the village?"

There was a quick suspicious glance from Oriana : then she said in a much smaller voice :—

"My father doesn't know I go there."

"Would he dislike it if he knew?"

"I expect so."

"But—you have nowhere else to go, have you?"

Oriana looked extremely surprised ; she muttered something and sank into silence. Then she looked up again and began to speak in an eager, explanatory tone :—

"I can't stay here, shut up, all the time, can I?"

"Of course not. I daresay it's very amusing in the village?"

"Yes—well—"

This time the hesitation did not last long. When Oriana spoke again it was in quite a different manner. Her sullenness disappeared as she began to describe the doings of herself and her companions on the island. Blanche listened and commented in her usual quiet way, and very soon Oriana forgot what she had begun to talk about ; she went back to her upbringing, her aunt, her father, Mme Relain —and again to her father, whose enigmatic figure seemed to dominate all her turbulent discourse.

So two hours passed. Blanche pushed forward the cake and fruit once more and Oriana, an apple in one hand and a madeleine in the other, sprawled near the stove. Now and then her wariness returned, but as Blanche made some gentle monosyllabic rejoinder the floodgates opened still further. Oriana's visions of constraint and discipline were gone : even the painted satin gown was momentarily forgotten. No one had ever so listened to her in all her short tempestuous life.

And, as she heard, Blanche Peverence received an impression of neglect and luxury, of riches and squalor, that her orderly mind could not assemble. She never understood exactly how it was that this girl, who slept between scented sheets, had her weekly bath—when she remembered it—beneath a Boucher, and dined under a Titian or a Velasquez, was sometimes hungry, dirty, and cold ; nor was the Englishwoman able to visualise the confusion of a life governed by heavily paid, half-frightened, half-revengeful servants, all of the peasant class, who alternately spoiled, teased, scolded,

over-fed, and refused food to the child whose charge was theirs. The killing boredom, the total aimlessness of Oriana's existence had sharpened rather than dulled the violence of her temperament, which had recently guided her towards theft and destruction in the company of the island youths whom she bullied or beguiled as the mood fell on her. Every now and then when she had warning of her father's arrival she twisted up her curls into the latest fashion, put on an exaggerated gown and swept down to criticise his latest purchase and hear the gossip—when he recollects it—of their acquaintances on the mainland. On these occasions she usually over-ate at supper and spent the rest of the next day in bed, ringing her bell and teasing her monkey. Her aunt, eccentric, embittered, and pious, had always disliked and avoided her ; beyond pushing her niece to mass, and criticising her behaviour, she had done nothing for her. One or two gentlewomen, French and English, had been engaged as governesses and had left almost immediately with horrifying tales of life at Yssimbault, some of which Blanche had already heard.

In this first long conversation it was difficult to create a picture of Jean Desmarests ; disapproval could be felt, but little else. It was plain that Oriana was proud of her father's wealth and position, and eager to display the knowledge of pictures, china and sculpture that the wish to impress him had caused her to acquire so early. Apart from being the source of this parrot wisdom, providing her with an enormous wardrobe into which the jewels and laces of half a dozen dead or bankrupt princesses had been tossed, and insisting on her complete isolation, M. Desmarests had seemingly ignored his only child.

With some reservations and considerable firmness Miss Peverence faced her task ; for she had set herself the regeneration of this wild and unloved girl. Her humility as she contemplated the position was superimposed, her self-confidence immense. She applied herself methodically and without other emotion than pity to the thought of subjugating the creature : and in that absence of strong or complicated feeling lay some of her power. Oriana was used to rousing anger or admiration or both : no one had yet listened to her with this matter-of-fact interest. Now her overstrained nerves stopped jerking her from one distraction to another, and she quenched her thirst for sympathy in a long cool draught.

That first outpouring passed quickly for Oriana. She stumbled

from Blanche's room in the early hours of the morning, dazed and delighted. To-morrow she was going to show Miss Peverence all her dresses ; for in those vast perambulations of talk Blanche's flower-painting had been commandeered without demur, without even the apology Oriana had ready in case it was needed.

CHAPTER 7 *The Man of Fortune*

DURING the course of the next few days Blanche contemplated a familiar spectacle in Oriana's demands on her attention. She had been long accustomed to the adulation of youth : but her effect on Oriana was at the same time more personal and more profound than usual, since it had nothing to do with her novels, of which the moral content had been partly lost in translation and partly disregarded by the reader.

Now their first long talk had made Oriana dependent on Blanche as a listener ; the morning after it she recalled her first ungraciousness and resolved to undo any bad effect it might have had on the intended confidante of all her moods. So she got up early, put on a clean muslin dress, gathered a bouquet from the conservatory and presented herself at the door of the yellow parlour.

Oriana's upbringing had made her at the same time timid and violent ; she had lain awake half the night thinking of the enigmatic Englishwoman, of all she had told her and of all that there was still to tell—but suppose she had begun to pack already ? Oriana's eyes filled with tears as she stood outside Blanche's door, her flowers clutched in a hot hand. She was about to rush in : then suddenly it occurred to her to knock in a delicate, hesitating manner : there was no answer : she knocked again.

Anne-Marie opened the door and stood amazed at the sight of her young mistress in this suppliant position. Oriana, seeing the room empty, stamped her foot at the maid's gaping expression and whispered urgently :—

“Where is she ? Has she gone ?”

Anne-Marie looked quite aghast. “Gone ? She's not awake yet—I was to call her at eight o'clock.”

Oriana hesitated ; then with a nervous cat-like movement she slipped into the room, whispering :—“I’ll wait—what time is it now ?”

Anne-Marie, more than ever bewildered, pointed to the clock on the mantelpiece. Oriana sat down, looking anxiously at her flowers ; again aware of the maid’s inquisitive glance, she made a furious grimace and said in the same low sibilant tone :—

“What’s the matter with you ? Get back in there !”

As soon as she was alone Oriana started up to listen at the bedroom door ; then she went to the window and flung it open, holding out her flowers to keep them fresh ; she leant against the shutter with a sigh, pushing the hair off her forehead. So it was that Blanche saw her as she came out of the bedroom in her dressing-gown.

Oriana turned with a gasp, all her intentions confused. “So you haven’t gone !”

There was a pause while Blanche contemplated Oriana, whom she saw for the first time neither squalidly nor extravagantly dressed. Oriana drew herself up, fixing her light greenish-hazel eyes on Blanche’s ; her guest replied :—

“That would make it a very short visit—did you expect me to be gone ?”

Oriana looked at the floor and at the ceiling : she said abruptly :—“I was rude. I am sorry.”

Blanche’s smile faded as she realised the deeper level of the apology and she put out her hand, looking directly and seriously at the speaker. Oriana thrust the flowers into it, her face suddenly radiant. Blanche had not finished admiring the bouquet when the girl interrupted her with :—

“When you have had breakfast”—she paused, as if the concession had been made with an effort—“shall I take you for a walk? We could go down to the village—then we could come back and talk here.”

Raising her bouquet to her lips, Blanche continued to look over the top of it in a contemplative manner. Then she said in a gentle but decisive voice :—

“Sit down, Mademoiselle, if you please. I have something to say to you.” *

Oriana did as she was told, staring at the speaker. Blanche

remained standing, tall and straight in her dark blue draperies ; she now looked down on the girl, who must fix her glance from below ; the position having been thus adjusted, Blanche continued :—

“I am going to stay here, if my presence is agreeable to you, and to M. Desmarests. But it is fair to us both—for this concerns only you and me—that I should make clear the conditions under which I stay”—she paused and put her hand on Oriana’s shoulder, her tone making the phrase rather joking than arbitrary—“They are—certain hours to myself during the day. I have a great deal more to hear—have I not?—about your wishes, and they of course will come first when we are together.”

Oriana murmured assent ; it was plain that she was very much taken aback at this deliberate planning. Blanche went on :—

“In order to give my best, our companionship—may I call it that?—must not start till half-past ten in the morning. After that, I shall be at your disposal till the evening, when again, for an hour before supper, I must be alone.”

Oriana’s expression changed from anxiety to relief. She nodded, jumped up and said quickly and emphatically :—

“I see. You must be alone now. I will come back later.”

“No—wait, please. This is our first morning. Come back soon—and let us breakfast together. To-morrow will be time enough to start our regular hours.”

Oriana was already half-way to the door ; she swept round, nodded again, pressed her lips together as if afraid of an unwanted volubility and slid out of the room, her expression very knowing, her half-shut eyes turning towards Blanche as she disappeared.

The next few days passed as Oriana had planned, in the enjoyment of being treated as if she were a woman instead of a tiresome child. Her wealth had never brought her the attentions that Blanche seemed to give as a matter of course ; this produced a behaviour that Oriana evolved minute by minute in the ebb and flow of her anxiety to please.

Blanche, still sceptical, held a little aloof. Neither on that day nor on those immediately following her arrival did she promise to stay on at Yssimbault for an indefinite time ; that must depend, she said, on M. Desmarests’ approval.

“But he’s never here !” exclaimed Oriana, opening her eyes very

wide. "How can it matter—" she stopped and added hastily, "I mean, he will like you as I do."

"Are you so alike, then?" asked Blanche with a smile.

Since her arrival a week had passed and they were about to begin the inspection of Oriana's wardrobe. They were now waiting in the boudoir while two astonished maids prepared the display in the dressing-room beyond.

"No—no—" was the reply, "I am like my mother—she was a Sicilian—a lady."

As Blanche looked rather blank Oriana added hastily :—"My father and his father worked in a factory in Milan. My mother never worked."

This explanation reduced Blanche to silence and Oriana continued :—"My mother's family had a property near Girgenti."

"Really?"

"Yes—many farms and vineyards. My mother ran away to marry my father when he made his fortune. All her brothers and sisters are dead now—all except my Aunt Beatrice, and she is a nun. I am so glad I shall never see her again."

"Have you no portrait of your mother?"

"No—but I am like her, my father says so—" replied Oriana firmly, "She was beautiful."

Blanche said nothing and Oriana gazed at her with an expression of earnest confidence. Suddenly their attention was diverted by the entrance of Mme Relain, who with a glance at Blanche and an up and down look at her charge, announced :—

"M. Desmarests will be here to dinner. He has landed and is on his way."

Oriana stamped her foot and exclaimed :—"Why was I not told? Who sighted the launch?"

Mme Relain raised her eyebrows and replied coldly that M. Desmarests had crossed on the ferry. Meanwhile Blanche had risen and was smoothing her dress and hair. Mme Relain went out, leaving the door open ; Oriana shut it with a bang and rushed to the mirror, muttering crossly :—"This is what comes of staying up here—Arnaud would have told me."

"Let me help you—" said Blanche gently, and forcing down her own nervousness she began to re-tie Oriana's sash and to pin up her hair.

"My rings ! My necklace !" the girl exclaimed, tugging fiercely at the bell.

"You look very well as you are," said Blanche persuasively, horrified at the thought of jewels with the morning toilette of a young girl for once suitably dressed in pink frills and chestnut satin ribbons ; but all she got was an agitated glance as Oriana hurried from the room.

Left alone, Blanche looked down at her blue and white checked poplin ; she was sufficiently impressed by Oriana's concern to consider changing into something soberer and more fitting for a dame de compagnie—for that, certainly, would be M. Desmarests' view of her position ; then she decided to wait in case she was called for. She began to walk up and down, increasingly disturbed by the hurrying footsteps and shouted directions that now echoed all round her. Yssimbault was in an infectiously tumultuous state—suppose, after all, she was not liked ? Never before had she had to consider the consequences of such a question.

She had not long to do so ; she had not been alone a quarter of an hour when she was summoned to the library where M. Desmarests was waiting for her.

A few minutes later Blanche heard the sound of her own name, followed by the closing of a door. She was standing at the top of a long dim room, lined on either side with elaborately carved chinoiserie bookshelves ; their black and gold lacquer was repeated in the panels round the fireplace, where a three-foot Chinese goddess in white porcelain smiled down from a dark green marble mantelpiece at the slight, tense, watching figure of Blanche's employer.

There was a second's pause while M. Desmarests and his guest contemplated one another ; then both advanced, he very rapidly, she with a nervous deliberation. Blanche was aware that he was talking in an exclamatory, genial manner ; she could only take in, as they met and he took her hand, that she was looking down at him—and this seemed wrong and embarrassing ; then she saw a delicate sallow face with a jutting nose, a high forehead and small, very bright eyes.

Talking all the time, M. Desmarests placed her hand on his arm ; so they moved to the fireplace, where he stood back, looking at her with a frank gleaming stare that was like his daughter's. He was

still talking in brief, jerky sentences, was in the middle of one as she began to listen.

"—we must have ten minutes together before dinner—I have told my daughter—I seldom see anyone alone—how long have you been here, Mademoiselle? Do you like Yssimbault?" For the first time he paused, poked his head forward for Blanche's reply and then went on :—

"It is lonely here—but you will be able to write—yes! I should be much to blame if I let you give all your time to my daughter—but she tells me you understand one another already—is that so?"

Again Blanche could not be sure whether he meant her to answer, for he continued almost without a pause :—"She is young for her age—don't you think so? A child—we must see to that, you and I—do you like her?"

"It is more to the point that she should like me, I think," replied Blanche, whose self-possession was gradually returning.

M. Desmarests laughed and threw out a small claw-like hand, ejaculating :—"Good! Good! She will—she does—she tells me you are most kind. What have you done to her? She looks positively lady-like already—how is that?" He did not wait at all this time, but continued with a flash of teeth and sharp look up and down :—"She is quick to adapt herself—too much so—that's why I keep her shut up here—time enough to see the world when she's married—don't you think so, Mademoiselle? But we must talk about that another time—are you hungry?—" darting to the bell—"Do they look after you? It's good air here—do you like the sea? No, you are a Londoner—"

By this time Blanche realised that she would have to interrupt to make herself heard; she continued to nod and smile or shake her head while her employer's talk continued. He went on looking at her in a keen, appraising way, breaking off now and then to glance round him or to finger the Chinese figure on the mantelpiece. Did she care for bric-à-brac—furniture—pictures? "That is a seventeenth-century piece—you can tell by the glaze—" he beckoned her nearer, his quick hands caressing the porcelain, eager to explain, on the alert for comment and praise. Blanche hastily declared her ignorance, and he nodded, adding :—"You will soon know—there is

plenty to see here, plenty to learn. After dinner I will show you—but you are interested in these things?"

"Yes—" said Blanche in a firm clear voice, suddenly determined to make the statement a true one.

"I have taught my daughter the difference—what?—yes—dinner is served, Mademoiselle—come—are you there, child?" as Oriana, wearing a parure of turquoise and pearls, her look half sly, half smiling, appeared in the doorway, "Mlle Peverence says you are a bad girl—ha! ha!—don't you?—so we are going to punish you—are we not, Mademoiselle?"—and offering Blanche his arm, he hurried her into a vast dining-room, where he placed himself between his daughter and his guest at the end of a long pink alabaster table; this he subjected to a sharp scrutiny, rubbing it with his finger. He stopped in the middle of a sentence, jerked his head backwards, and rapped out as if into space:—

"Have they been using soda to clean this table?"

The major-domo, a smooth stout man, approached his master with bent head and a disturbed expression.

"They have! I can see it! No soda, no soda—who is responsible? It must be soap and warm water—warm—not boiling and not iced—do you understand?" and brushing aside the reply M. Desmarests switched back to his teasing of Oriana.

As dinner continued Blanche tried to assess the relationship between father and daughter; this was difficult, because one talked almost without a pause while the other was exclusively occupied in the enjoyment of the meal which was short and simple. Clear soup was followed by eggs and crayfish baked in cream, chicken with side-dishes of vegetables and salad, ice-pudding, cheese, fruit and coffee. M. Desmarest consumed a little of everything in a speedy and negligent manner: his daughter ate largely of the egg dish and then seemed to reserve herself for an attack on the sweet, of which she took three helpings with a jubilant and preoccupied expression. Nothing that she had so far observed in her employer led Blanche to expect that he would concern himself with his daughter's manners: she was therefore surprised when he made a jocular comment on her preferences. Oriana looked unembarrassed; it was plain that she had for years ignored such criticisms as these.

When immediately recalling that meal Blanche found it difficult to account for the extraordinary uneasiness which her employer

caused in her ; later on she perceived that her first judgement had been at fault. He did in fact listen, perhaps only to half a sentence, picking up glances, gestures, intonations and sliding them all into his memory for future use while his vitality rushed everything before it at breakneck speed. His energy seemed to fill up all the mental space ; his questions, his laugh, were not those of a sensitive or of an aimless individual : they were part of a whirring, throbbing machine that swept everything into its powerful and intricate communications. Blanche was to learn that only his daughter had formed the habit of remaining outside these encirclements whose grinding quality did not preclude a certain gaiety and humour flickering in and out of all that was most inhuman and disconcerting in his personality. He enjoyed very simple fun, and Blanche soon learned how best to receive his hoaxing, schoolboy method of attack when it fell on her ; his sudden rages were equally childish and light, and had nothing to do with his essential purposes.

When they had all finished eating Blanche received a further shock in the arrival of M. and Mme Relain and two middle-aged secretaries for coffee and dessert ; they appeared like the nursery party in an English household, taking their places with the same quiescent yet exhilarated air, and glancing at one another over the tall gilt coffee-cups as their master threw out questions which he answered for them. His demeanour now changed a little ; no longer so lively, he assumed a gruff familiarity, a coarseness of tone that Blanche was later to hear contemptuously described as his Corsican manner by those whose subservience called forth his self-identification with the great Emperor. No one interrupted his monologues till Oriana, dabbing at her damp flushed forehead, demanded to be escorted back to the mainland during the course of the afternoon.

"You can go to-morrow—" her father replied. "You—and Mademoiselle, naturally,—are invited to Marécourt to spend the afternoon. To-day I am going to show Mademoiselle the collections—after that I return to the factory."

He got up as he spoke ; the three men also rose, and Blanche made a movement to follow, watching Oriana who pushed back her chair, glanced sharply at her father and muttered something inaudible.

"What is that ? What do you say ?"

"I don't want to go to Marécourt—" said Oriana, with a pouting look and a flounce.

"Why not? Aymon is back from Paris—don't you want to see him?"

"No."

M. Desmarests looked faintly amused; he glanced round at his circle who, with the exception of Blanche, assumed a knowing and imitative mirth. He then turned to his guest and declared himself at her disposal if she cared to accompany him.

Aware that this was a command rather than a request, Blanche moved forward; before she and Desmarests had reached the door Oriana was between them, tugging at her father's arm.

"Papa! Remember what you promised—I shall wait for you in the library—please—"

The two vivid faces were close together now; for the first time Blanche saw Jean Desmarests look at his daughter with something like affection and pleasure: he assumed another version of his Napoleonic manner as he pinched her cheek and replied:—"We shall see—if you are a good girl—" and then he almost ran out of the room, pulling Blanche along with him.

The next two hours were exhausting. Blanche found it hard to take in, let alone appreciate, a long procession of unco-ordinated objects, some of which formed part of the highest cultural traditions while others showed a vulgarity that ranged from the riotous to the feebly derivative. There was no point of departure, no system: it seemed that there never had been. The Guido Reni jostled the Velasquez: the Jacques Petit quarrelled with the Sèvres; the purest eighteenth century classicism yielded to the crash and smash of mid-Victorian crudity. Yet in spite of the hurly-burly the whole effect was curiously satisfying and vital. That elegance and fastidiousness had fled shrieking from the scene did not obviate a certain reckless baroque splendour. This wild exuberance had nothing to do with French culture; Jean Desmarests had brought it from his own country.

In spite of her ignorance Blanche was enjoying herself. No two men could have been more unlike than Desmarests and her father; yet there was an odd similarity in the headlong, unself-conscious enthusiasm that assumed an interest as deep if not as knowledgeable as its owner's.

Blanche's concern with objects of *vertu* had so far been confined to the limits of her novels ; to her surprise she learnt that her employer had read two of them and was under the impression that her descriptions of wealthy upper and middle-class interiors were tantamount to an æsthetic development that she must now deny. When she did so he looked grave but not disappointed ; then he put his hand on her arm encouragingly.

"But you have seen such things as these ? You appreciate them ?"

"I have seen nothing like that, certainly," replied Blanche. They had finished their rounds in Oriana's boudoir and were looking at the *calvaire* which M. Desmarests described as one of the rarest and most valuable of his possessions.

He opened the case and took out a tiny kneeling figure with a delicacy of touch and a look of concern that contact with his daughter could never, Blanche now decided, have produced. He was unexpectedly silent ; then he gave her the current price of his Nevers glass collection of which this was the principal piece. Blanche said nothing ; she was not averse to showing her lack of interest in this point of view. Her employer looked slyly up at her ; he then demanded her opinion.

Blanche truthfully replied that the *calvaire* had affected her. "I am not sure if I think it beautiful," she added. "It is too strange, and melancholy—almost—"

"My daughter finds it frightening, positively," said M. Desmarests, replacing the little disciple at the foot of the cross ; he then blew at the dust in the case, shook his head and shut it up, suddenly preoccupied ; his thoughts seemed to be elsewhere. Suddenly he rounded on Blanche ; with his thrusting jerk of the head he demanded :—

"Do you like this place ? Have you decided to stay here ?"

Blanche unwillingly returned that cold bright look before she replied. She had tried to stand mentally at a distance from the sweep and twist of the personality now enveloping her ; but it was like trying to step away from the crowded machinery of a badly planned factory ; there was only just room ; she had her back to the wall as she faced him. Then a sudden wrathful pity for the girl whose sanctum this was supposed to be overcame and confused her ; she spoke without deliberating.

"I will stay, Monsieur. I want to do what I can for your daughter."

The tears were in her eyes ; she felt her hand seized and shaken. Now she was unreasonably excited—what was happening ? She seemed to have outlined the plot of a new book and was successfully beginning the first chapter.

M. Desmarests then drew up a chair, helped her into it and sat down opposite, as if the trivialities were over and the essentials were at last before them. This was what Oriana was waiting to know, he said ; but before joining her with the good news he must outline his plans for her future. He paused, gave Blanche a piercing look and leant forward, spreading out his hands on his knees.

"She has been neglected," he said, his expression much as it had been when exhibiting a restored or doubtful piece of china. "Her table manners, for one thing, are not those of a lady. She will be eighteen in three months—in six she should be married. And that is what we must now discuss, you and I."

CHAPTER 8 *The Man of Family*

TOWARDS the end of the nineteenth century it became known that Miss Peverence had bequeathed to the British Museum a manuscript, not a work of fiction, relating her connection with the families of Marécourt and Desmarests. This record was to be published fifty years after her death : and no pressure, public or private, ever induced her to forestall it with anecdote or reminiscence. One reference was made to it in a letter to Cordelia Marchant. "If my first important conversation with M. Desmarests had not been interrupted almost before it began," she wrote, "I think I should have viewed his daughter's position more impersonally than was afterwards possible, when I had come to know the de Roncesvaulx and in fact all the Marécourt family. If I had not been plunged into a situation of which I knew nothing, if I had been informed of it as and when M. Desmarests intended, I might have acted differently—whether for better or for worse, I cannot now determine."

The unconscious arrogance of such a statement rang back across the years to an echo of derision ; but during the autumn of 1864 Miss Peverence was preparing to receive her employer's first confidences with only a momentary surprise that a foreigner and dependent should find herself in such a position. If he had been able to outline his daughter's prospects then and there, asking her opinion, Blanche would have applied her judgement without any demur but the formal premise that, as a spinster and an English-woman, she was at a disadvantage over the question of continental marriages.

The actual moment of interruption came as a relief ; she was in any case quite certain that Jean Desmarets would renew his discourse as soon as possible ; it was not till very much later that she began to guess at the range of his preoccupations and to see his daughter's alliance in proportion to the rest of them.

Oriana now burst into the room in a transport of impatience. She had been waiting for hours—what had been decided ?

She turned scarlet when she heard the reply, and stood twisting her plump ringed fingers together ; then she shot a look at Blanche, a genial, malicious glance. She was not to be tamed : she would elude and defy ; so the older woman read her expression as the blush of pleasure sank and died. Oriana then glided up to Blanche, took her hand, and speaking as if they were alone, said in a wheedling voice :—

“Shall we go for our walk now ?”

“Mademoiselle has had her walk—she is already fatigued,” said Desmarets. It was characteristic of him that he made no protest at the interruption ; his eyes wandered back to the *calvaire* : Oriana’s followed them ; she said quickly :—

“That should be taken away—it is not safe here—and as her father raised his eyebrows she went on with a certain triumph :—“It will be broken one of these days, you’ll see—Misti jumps up at it, and—”

She was interrupted by a fierce exclamation ; she stepped back as her father thrust his face into hers :—

“That’s enough ! If you let your monkey near that, I’ll wring its neck, do you hear ?”

Oriana put her head on one side and said plaintively —“I can’t help it, if—

"Keep the creature out of here ! You—" he stopped, glanced hastily at Blanche, and went on, with a resumption of his Corsican-ogreish geniality :—"What will Mademoiselle think of you ? Be a good girl and do what you're told. I think I know the monkey who wants to destroy one of the finest possessions I have—and it is not Misti—eh ?"

"I hate it—it frightens me."

"Nonsense—you must learn to be civilised. Only peasants talk so foolishly."

Oriana shrugged her shoulders. "Put it in *her* room," she suggested, jerking her head at the visitor.

"What are these manners ? Do you think Mademoiselle will stay here if—yes ? What is it ? I am coming—good-bye, Mademoiselle—good-bye, Oriana—" and he was gone.

A few minutes later it was known that the launch was carrying M. Desmarests and his secretaries back to the mainland and that he would not be sleeping at Yssimbault as he had intended.

Oriana and Blanche spent the rest of the day in a peaceful and talkative manner. Blanche was surprised and disappointed to hear that M. Desmarests' next visit might not take place for another fortnight or more. She decided that to resume the topic of Oriana's marriage without further explanation from him would be indelicate, and so confined herself to an enquiry about their visit of the next afternoon. Where was Marécourt ? And whom were they going to visit ? Oriana was evasive and sulky.

"O—people we've always known. He is the—no, I won't tell you, because then you might want to see them, and I don't. I want to stay here with you."

With a strange meekness Oriana received Blanche's decision. They must go ; it was her father's wish. They parted for the night on this understanding. The next day Oriana was nowhere to be seen ; she did not reappear until the hour of departure was long past. Meanwhile, following her suggestion, Blanche collected a certain amount of data about the Marécourt family from the Almanach de Gotha.

It was odd that Oriana, who generally enjoyed giving information, should have made a face and told her to find the book in the library. Now, in the late afternoon, the sunlight had sunk away from the gilding on the fretted bookshelves : the lacquer shone

darkly : the marble mantelpiece made a cool green gleaming altar for the ice-white curves and the sad perpetual smile of the porcelain goddess who seemed to mock the affected Orientalism that surrounded her. The tall Englishwoman in her neat dark dress was not more incongruously placed against this derivative and bombastic prettiness than the lifeless figure of a subtle and refined civilisation. The delicate strangeness of the Chinese figure moved Blanche to a sudden hopeless sadness, a longing for home and the simplicities of the everyday world. For a moment she was aware of the mystical and ecstatic melancholy of the East : the solid, gaily coloured walls she had built round her own conceptions crumbled into acid dust ; she tasted a disillusionment so strong, so bitter, that it was almost overwhelming ; then she turned aside and the bright fortifications rose once more and enclosed her. She had not come to the library to contemplate herself in relation to an antiquity she considered grotesque, but for a guide-book, like any other intelligent tourist.

It took Blanche some time to trace the thick squat volumes of the Almanach de Gotha ; she opened that of the current year and found the place. She read—" *Maison de Marécourt v. Roncesvaulx*" —and turning onwards, saw that the print was blurred and the symbols of death and marriage unfamiliar and puzzling. Yet by degrees she disentangled the outlines of a great house ; like a fragile faded ribbon the record unfolded itself—Roncesvaulx, Duke and Peer of France.

In the year 1009 the house of Marécourt was founded by Raussin de Marécourt, afterwards Raussin de la Vallée de Rimoudy. This title seemed to have been abandoned a few hundred years later ; Rimoudy was in Poitou, and after the crusades the family moved to the northern coast. In Brittany and Normandy their castles rose and were rebuilt and re-fortified until the seventeenth century, when Baudoin de Marécourt was created Duc de Roncesvaulx under Louis.XIV ; his marriage with a German princess gave his eldest son the title of Prince of Castell-Rohrau in Bavaria. Blanche's eye jumped to the fatal period at the end of the eighteenth century : but there was no record of how the first Revolution had affected the Marécourts and nothing of note before the paragraphs dealing with the present head of the house. The Duc de Roncesvaulx had married Alix-Frédégonde-Louise-Gabrielle de Sixte de

Bourbon Méré, of the house of Méré, and had issue, two sons and a daughter. The elder son, Aymon-Raussin-Gabriel-Marie de Marécourt, was thirty-two ; the second, Baudoin-Florimond-Louis, twenty-nine ; the daughter, Ariane-Alix-Claude, twenty-seven and a Carmelite nun. The parents and the sons appeared to be living together ; three addresses were given, one in Paris, one in Provence and the third, Château de Marécourt, rounded off all the information available. The Almanach de Gotha ignored equally wealth, ruin, honour and disgrace ; but between the lines of names and dates Blanche seemed to be looking down over the slopes of feudal sovereignty and the valleys of war and pestilence and court favour to the black chasm of 1789 ; she saw a moribund power creep back to end its days on the soil that had nourished it for a thousand years : and now, among the collaterals, she perceived the desperate transfusion of new wealth from other countries and classes, from America most of all. Cincinnati, Ohio, New York, Chicago,—the syllables clanged a tocsin of alarm as in those families whose epitaph, "*éteinte dans les mâles*," had previously caught her eye.

For a long time Blanche sat pondering, so drawn into the past that the future became impalpable, the present meaningless and dull. Her novels had had much to do with the old nobility ; yet nothing she had written stirred her as did these dry annals of a living race ; she read the names over and over, and seemed to know the protagonists of a new romance ; she saw the courtly father, the white-haired stately mother, the elegant dark grace of the sons, the mysterious remoteness of the Carmelite sister, the soaring fragility of the Gothic castle, the faithful servants, all the glimmering habiliments of historic tradition ; she was dreaming, lost.

The door banged. She heard quick footsteps, a scolding voice, and rose with the book still in her hand to face Jean Desmaret. He marched up to her and pushed his angry face forward.

"What is this ? Where is Oriana ?" As usual, Blanche was given no time to reply and he rushed on :—"She's with the village children—is it true ? Always, always down there, running about with those—come, answer me ! Why are you not together ?"

Blanche began to speak, but before she could get out more than a word or two the door opened again to admit Oriana in her blue blouse, dirty and hot, her eyes flashing. She got between Blanche and her father, exclaiming vehemently :—

"You are not to speak to her like that ! It is my fault—I always go down to the village—I went before she came ! If you speak to her rudely, she will go away—she—"

She stopped with a gasp as Jean Desmarests turned and slapped her face, first on one side and then on the other ; he seized her by the shoulders and was raising his hand to strike again when Blanche snatched Oriana from his reach ; she thrust the girl behind her and said in a loud firm voice :—

"M. Desmarests, this cannot go on. Please ask your daughter to leave us. I wish to speak to you alone."

Jean Desmarests was panting with the violence of the blows he had given his daughter : his glittering eyes were fixed on Blanche ; he said, without removing his glance :—"Go, Oriana."

"But she'll go—she won't stay—don't you see ?" exclaimed the girl, bursting into noisy childish sobbing. "You must ask her to stay—you must beg her pardon."

M. Desmarests shifted his now sardonic gaze to his daughter. "And why are you so anxious that Mademoiselle should remain, pray ?"

Oriana's eyes dropped ; she rubbed her flushed cheek and was silent, still sniffing a little. Jean Desmarests said more gently :—"Go, child. I also wish to speak alone with Mademoiselle."

Almost before Oriana had left the room Blanche began rapidly :—

"Monsieur, you must listen to what I have to say. You have allowed your daughter to run wild—wait !—that is of the past, and I have nothing to do with it—but I wish to win her allegiance in my own way, and that cannot be done by trying to discipline her as if she were a naughty child. You told me she was of a marriageable age—"

"And is she to be prepared for it by—" M. Desmarests swallowed the words on his lips and substituted "making a fool of herself, perhaps worse, how do I know ?—with the lads on the island ?"

The discussion continued on these heated lines for some minutes before M. Desmarests curbed his first anger and agreed to call his daughter back. It was useless, he averred, to ask her how she had used her freedom ; if she was no longer—again, with a contemptuous effort, he produced a more acceptable phrase, and went on to ask Blanche what she proposed. He had heard other, unverifiable, rumours of Oriana's bathing from the rocks with her companions—

and all this, of course, had come from the quarter he least wished to —once more he broke off, a little taken aback at Blanche's manner.

When Oriana returned Blanche made clear the conditions under which she would continue her employment. She now formally made herself responsible for Oriana's behaviour. She would draw up a time-table for their days together, provided that M. Desmarests himself visited them once a week to hear their progress and that she and her charge should be allowed access to the mainland and as far as the seaport whenever they needed a change of scene. (Blanche had several other plans which for the moment she kept to herself.) She concluded by saying that the next time Oriana took refuge in the village she would consider herself dismissed ; she had no wish to stay except to be of use.

M. Desmarests faced this turning of the tables with rough laughter and forced applause. He thus returned to the derivative bluffness which Blanche was beginning to see as a weapon rather than as a piece of acting, and looking her up and down, said jovially :—“Of course I must agree—well done, Mademoiselle !”

Half an hour later Blanche and Oriana were alone. Blanche was unable to comment on the scene that had just taken place ; its violence had horrified her. Oriana said ingratiatingly :—

“You were clever—my father likes that. Now he knows you as I do, there will be no more trouble.”

“But I meant every word I said—” replied Blanche, smiling in spite of her agitation.

“Well, now we can enjoy ourselves—we will go to the mainland every day.”

“Wait till you see my time-table, Mademoiselle. I am serious.”

Oriana moved quickly towards Blanche and took her hand ; looking at her through half-shut eyes, she said caressingly :—

“I am Oriana—please—and you are—Blanche—and you were going to paint my ball-dress for me—do you remember you promised ?”

“Very well. But the visit to Marécourt—should not some apology be made ?”

“O—well—my father could ask them to dinner—would you like that ?” replied Oriana, with the air of one giving in to a difficult child.

“It is for him to decide.”

Oriana darted out of the room and returned a few moments later having arranged for the invitation to be made. "I hope they won't all come—" she then added.

"All?" said Blanche, secretly condemning her own curiosity.

"O ! I like the old people—at least, not very much. It's Aymon—my husband, you know—did my father tell you?—that I—"

"Your *husband*? What—"

"Well—my betrothed, you would say. We are to be married when I am eighteen, and then, *then*—I shall go to Paris—you must come with us."

Blanche was speechless. Oriana continued to look at her in a half-absent, half-anxious manner. "What is it? You must not mind my father. He is always losing his temper."

"No—" said Blanche feebly. "But—I am rather bewildered. Is Marécourt—are the—"

"It belongs to my father—" Oriana interrupted, in the rapid, arrogant tone she seemed to have inherited. "There is the Château and the village of Marécourt. You passed them on your way here."

"Did I? It was dark."

"O ! yes—well—they have no money, all the property is my father's, manor, woods, everything. He allows them to live there. When I marry Aymon we shall leave the old people at the Château. We shan't come back much, except in the summer. We shall live at the Villa—it is already decorated—not like this, quite in the modern style."

There was a pause.

"Mademoiselle—Oriana—" said Blanche at last in an extinguished voice, "You must forgive me—but all this has been—I am rather—"

"Shall I get you a glass of wine?"

"No—I must be alone for a little while to think over all you have told me. Give me half an hour—and then we will do whatever you like."

Presently Blanche and Oriana were together again ; the painting of the dress was discussed, even the time-table drawn up with no more rebellion than a shrug and a frown from Oriana. Blanche had not been able to co-ordinate her own thoughts on the subject of Aymon de Marécourt and noted that Oriana referred to him

seldom and casually. Blanche was prepared to accept the custom of the country as far as the romantic side was concerned ; but the frivolity and childishness of Oriana's attitude was another matter and must be discussed with her father.

Meanwhile Blanche prepared to meet the Roncesvaulx and their sons, only to hear on the morning of the dinner-party that the young men had gone off on a hunting expedition and that the parents would appear alone.

When they did Blanche was disillusioned. The Duc de Roncesvaulx was enormously stout, with the red heavy features and thick limbs of a Norman peasant ; his hair had been fair and was now grey, a few straw-coloured locks still streaking his untidy beard. His wife was small and spare, with a wrinkled sallow face and heavy chin ; she looked, and was, extremely lively and intelligent in comparison with her husband, who had in common with his future daughter-in-law an absorption in the pleasures of eating ; he refused wine and drank large quantities of cider throughout the meal. The Duchesse de Roncesvaulx made herself moderately agreeable to Blanche ; her subject was theology, and she was anxious to discuss the first Oxford Movement, in which she was much better documented than the daughter of William Peverence. Oriana, over-dressed and over-jewelled, silent and argumentative by turns, appeared anxious to end the meal and escape with Blanche for one of their interminable conversations. During coffee the hot-house containing rare tropical plants and some newly arrived humming-birds came under discussion ; the whole party went off to inspect it, Oriana trailing sulkily behind, a casket of *marrons glacés* under her arm.

All Blanche could see of the relationship between her employer and his guests was that the Duc de Roncesvaulx seemed intimidated by his host's flow of conversation, lumbering up to contribute to the last topic but one, while his wife held her consciousness of their social differences in reserve, as it were, allowing only a tinge of the coolness she could not entirely conceal to affect her attitude. There was much talk, for the first time in Blanche's presence, of the potteries and of M. Desmaret's methods with his employees. There had recently been a strike in one of the factories in Alsace and its owner outlined his tussle with the hands in a detached way that evidently shocked his guests. His explanation, "I worked in a

factory myself, you see, I know all the moves in that game—" was formally received and the subject changed as soon as possible.

CHAPTER 9 *The Heroine*

IT was not to be expected that Oriana's changed attitude towards Blanche would be sustained with the enthusiasm that had followed her first rebellion. Blanche never knew whether her unexplained absences were in fact spent in the forbidden company of the villagers : but they were not lengthy or frequent enough to justify investigation.

The situation became easier with their new freedom ; they made expeditions to the mainland through the village of Marécourt : but Oriana did not seem anxious to stop there, preferring to spend the afternoons at the seaport where she excitedly bought a mass of rubbish in the shops and waited to see the arrival of the packet whenever this was possible. At Blanche's suggestion she consented to picnic in the woods of Marécourt, although she announced afterwards that it seemed an uncomfortable and pointless procedure. Then they were rowed round the island once or twice ; but Oriana now seemed self-conscious and uneasy when she was in contact with the village population. The knowledge that she owed these diversions to Blanche for a time prevented her sinking back into the squalor and savagery of her former ways. She continued to eat an enormous quantity of sweets and still retired to bed in the sulks when Blanche refused to give in to a series of whims ; but as these bouts were ignored they became less frequent.

Their relationship was made a good deal easier by the departure of M. and Mme Relain, he temporarily, she for an indefinite period. Oriana ceased to demonstrate her wildness now that the cold appraisement of the housekeeper was removed : and Blanche became aware that her charge was capable of affections that she had hitherto lavished (Oh ! horror !) in the village and on her dogs and monkeys ; her exultation in Blanche's company became less selfish with the increase of her desire to please. In the absence of Mme Relain the servants settled into a routine of their own with rather

better effects than would have resulted in an English household. French orderliness and skill asserted themselves, and though the grumbling and waste continued they were kept within bounds. Oriana, as the chaperoned young lady, could not now be refused food or locked out of this or that wing, and she in her turn left the servants alone as she took up new occupations.

The mainland had at one time provided the Castle with a circle of acquaintances. Now, with the exception of the Roncesvaulx, there remained only two or three families with whom Oriana was on visiting terms ; of these, the M^{es} Riquet-Toustain, three spinster ladies, had a deprecatory regard for her. The two elder sisters, M^{es} Lydie and Alice, had called a few days after Blanche's arrival and left little impression beyond that of an old-fashioned formality of manner and dress. Shortly after the Roncesvaulx dinner-party Oriana took Blanche to see Mme de Caumont, a widow, who lived with her son and daughter-in-law and their two children some ten miles from the village of Marécourt. Mme de Caumont was forbidding and her son and his wife perfectly null. Very much later on Blanche heard that Oriana was tolerated in both houses only on account of her future connections ; both families were from time to time entertained at the Château de Marécourt : and Mme de Roncesvaulx had begged her old friends to overlook her future daughter-in-law's ill-breeding so that she might have their social support after the marriage.

Oriana liked playing with the Caumont grandchildren ; she had no use for the rest of the family. She had at one time been diverted by the reminiscent volubility of Mlle Marie Riquet-Toustain, until Blanche began to absorb her whole attention, with the result that for many weeks she made no effort to see any of her neighbours.

During the first weeks of their acquaintance Blanche discovered that Oriana had a taste for reading aloud. Between her tenth and eleventh years she had been sent to a convent school on the mainland ; the experiment was not successful ; after six months she was removed ; but during that time she had acquired a taste for recitation and, though she was not easily induced to learn, took pleasure in declaiming.

Blanche therefore based her not very alarming time-table on this recollection. She saw the uselessness of attempting to instruct

her pupil in the accomplishments in which most girls of her age were proficient ; painting and drawing, even flower-pressing, were as much beyond Oriana's capabilities as her inclination. She liked to sing to her guitar, but not often ; she preferred reading aloud while Blanche sketched or sewed. She had long rejected plain needlework, embroidery and the concoction of artificial flowers in wax, feathers, beads or coloured paper. There yet remained potichomanie, and with memories of her girls' classes in Rotherhithe, Blanche introduced Oriana to the meticulous filling of vases with coloured scraps of paper and cloth ; she also occasionally consented to cover boxes, frames and trays with the shells collected for her by the villagers.

To encourage this particular contact was perhaps dangerous ; but soon Blanche perceived that Oriana's taste for the company of her inferiors had been caused by her need of adulation ; she had failed to find it among her contemporaries on the island whom she alternately intimidated and annoyed. Her vanity had recoiled from their greedy self-seeking : and she was in fact secretly delighted when Blanche's suggestions indicated a more distant and condescending attitude.

Meanwhile Blanche determined to forget Oriana's problematic indiscretions with the island youths, although she was disapprovingly aware that the high value set on virginity was in this case financial rather than moral ; all she could do was to prepare the girl for a different and more useful life.

They seldom disputed ; there was a minor disagreement over the skin-tight evening gown in which Oriana had appeared at their second meeting. It was in vain that Blanche tried to express her conviction that on certain occasions a young girl's neck and bosom should be shrinkingly bared rather than suggestively concealed. Oriana thought the idea highly comical and adverted to it in derision. She knew all about Englishwomen ; everyone laughed at their dowdiness.

Very soon Oriana began to interest herself in Blanche's background ; the older woman's early life was not touched upon, however, until one day Oriana referred to the most recent example of her father's violent temper.

"If you had not been there he would have whipped me—" she remarked in a casual absent.tone. .

She looked sharply at Blanche and added :—“I suppose your father used to beat you sometimes ?”

Blanche put down her needlework and gazed in front of her ; then she looked at Oriana with a compassionate expression.

“I will tell you about my father one of these days. I have never done so, have I ?”

“What were you like when you were young ?”

“Not like you—” said Blanche smiling. “We were very poor, to begin with.”

“Really poor ? Like the people in the village ? Tell me—” said Oriana, abandoning her shell-work and leaning forward.

There was a pause ; then Blanche began to speak of some incident in her childhood. No mother—they were alike then ! Oriana clapped her hands.

A long conversation ensued, one of the first in which Oriana was audience. She discovered a new pleasure in the recapitulation of another’s childhood ; she was quick to reflect the tone of the narrator during the darker periods. Now all was dramatic, mysterious and sad. The Reverend William rose, vivid and heroic, an adored and tempestuous being, while Blanche conjured up a world of suffering and endeavour more brilliantly than she knew.

M. Desmarests kept his part of their bargain. During one of his weekly visits he and Blanche were alone and he interrupted her account of his daughter’s activities with a sudden enquiry about her writing. Blanche did not mention her diary ; she replied that she was not at present engaged on a work of fiction.

“I don’t understand that—” said Jean Desmarests, “I thought you and I were alike where work was concerned. I never take holidays.”

Blanche replied in her gentlest tone that she was sufficiently occupied not to miss her writing.

“The child is your work—eh ? Are you going to put us both into a novel one of these days ?”

Blanche answered non-committally and the subject dropped. It was not until the evening of that day when she was re-reading her journal that she realised how much Oriana’s personality had prevailed. Furthermore, she became aware that she herself was perfectly happy. Was this as it should be ? Would her father have approved ?

Blanche had for some time taken up the keys of Oriana's conscience—and now, as she read about her, the girl seemed the most promising of all her heroines. Florence Herriott, Edith Osgood, Mary and Margaret Cathcart, Dora and Gwendolen and Ethel and Gertrude and May and Isabel (to mention only a few), how poorly conceived they were beside the brilliant figure of Oriana ! “*We are to be happy—all of us—*” yes, and Oriana too ; Blanche became aware that she had dedicated all her energies to the achievement of a happy ending.

Her serious and earnest simplicity admitted no paradox and no irony in the situation. Oriana succeeded Florence and Dora and the rest : and there was no one to tell her sponsor that she was in fact engaged on a creative work in her unconscious manipulation of events or to point out that to mingle fact and fancy is sometimes to burst the retort and set the laboratory afire.

In common with many writers Blanche was accustomed to “touch in” a few characteristic details before solidifying her heroines, who were as a rule orthodox in matters of charity and benevolence ; they issued from manors and rectories with soup, blankets, flannel, coals and good advice : they held Bible and sewing classes : they supported Church bazaars. Yet here was Oriana with all the possibilities and none of the attributes of beneficence.

In her expeditions to the village Blanche had looked for the needy without success. Though rough and wild, the inhabitants seemed prosperous and all were employed, either at Yssimbault itself or in the fishing trade. According to the standards of the day Jean Desmarests was an exceptional landlord, in that his acuteness saw his humblest tenant as a part of his enterprise ; even old age was provided for in a rough and ready fashion.

Nevertheless Blanche thought that one or two classes for the younger people might be admissible, and having obtained leave from her employer she put the suggestion to his daughter who received it with a fit of laughter. Classes ! Needlework ! Oriana could not exactly say why the idea appeared so excessively droll—but she would try it by all means.

Communication with the villagers had to go through a series of channels ; this was at length effected and an afternoon fixed for the first lesson in plain sewing. There was no need to fear that Oriana would revert to the dirty blouse of her former expeditions ;

with difficulty Blanche persuaded her not to appear in M. Worth's latest creation, a billowing lilac taffeta trimmed with seed-pearls and Venetian lace. In vain Oriana pointed out that this would inaugurate proceedings with greater brilliance and encourage a large following ; Blanche persisted, and after a long dispute the girl consented to put on a dove-grey silk muslin and the single ornament of an amber locket on a black velvet ribbon. She then assumed a haughty and flouncing demeanour, which as she entered threw the waiting pupils into convulsions of suppressed amusement.

Oriana turned red and her eyes flashed ; the giggles subsided a little as Blanche's composed and distant manner prevailed ; staring and pushing, the girls were induced to take their places. The smell of fish and garlic was strong ; as the class began to settle down the chattering voices rose round the tables. Oriana called peremptorily for silence and announced that she was going to read aloud for half an hour ; then there would be refreshments, then a further period of work and reading.

The art of listening had not been cultivated by the villagers. Oriana took up the book and began to read in her hoarse, cooing voice ; advised by Blanche, she had chosen a volume of Perrault's tales. For the first few minutes silence fell and she received a modicum of surprised attention ; then the voices broke out again as the needles flashed in the westering sun.

Oriana stamped her foot and looked angrily at Blanche, who lifted her hand and asked for silence. She was obeyed, but not for long ; this process was three times repeated before Oriana threw down the book and rushed out of the room.

The next gathering numbered some thirty girls. It was clear that the refreshments at least had had their effect. Oriana had withdrawn in displeasure to her boudoir ; but the wish to display herself was too great, and a few moments after the class had started she appeared in the lilac gown, carrying a jewelled fan and scented gloves, with the result that silence fell immediately.

There was now no question of an inattentive audience. Oriana threw Blanche a triumphant look and placed herself in a high-backed gilt chair at the end of the table. She then began to read the story of Cinderella and the glass slipper in a loud stern tone, as if in formal denunciation. The silence continued. The pupils dropped their work and stared at the reader.

The class was held in the picture gallery. Between the panels of Brazilian mahogany, the Rubens, the Sassoferato, the Delaroche, the Moroni stared down at the brown faces and dark garments of the seated girls, at the bent, smooth head of the Englishwoman and the be-diamonded ringlets and glittering necklace of the reader. On long pitchpine tables the heaps of white and brown cloth disposed themselves in rippling hillocks. The tall windows were open and let in the sound of the sea, the only accompaniment to the rhythm of Oriana's voice as she declaimed with emphatic severity the legend of triumphant beauty and virtue.

Blanche made no attempt to turn the workers' attention ; the effort of listening without staring at that absurd and resplendent figure was plainly beyond them. She put down the scissors with which she had been cutting out a pair of sleeves, slipped on to the nearest bench and composed herself to listen also, her glance running round the lines of vivid upturned faces.

The story continued. Cinderella was at the ball when the door opened and two young men came in, both fair of face and elegantly dressed ; one was taller and broader than the other.

Oriana stopped reading with a look of surprise and annoyance. The more imposing and, as Blanche now perceived, the elder of the two brothers, stepped forward, smiling. Oriana shut the book and rustled to meet him with a frowning, glinting look of defiant complacency.

CHAPTER 10 *Aymon de Marécourt*

BLANCHE'S first sight of Oriana's future husband was blurred by embarrassment. It was not to be expected that a young man of Aymon de Marécourt's traditions would find anything but amusement in the scene he had just interrupted : and his mockery must, above all others, affect Oriana's attitude towards her acts of benevolence. Blanche therefore suggested that she should herself continue the reading and leave Oriana to entertain her guests ; this was arranged on the understanding that when the class was over Blanche should join the party on their walk round the terraces.

When she did so, it was in the hope that she would be sufficiently

ignored to study Aymon and Baudoïn de Marécourt without the veil of a formal conversation between them. The elder brother's attitude so completely justified her own placing of herself as a paid dependent that Blanche, accustomed to a good deal of attention whenever she made a new acquaintance, took a moment or two to adjust her response.

Meanwhile Oriana's fiancé continued to rally her upon her new departure. It was difficult for Blanche then or at any other time to observe him covertly ; he was quick to seek and hold any tribute of look or speech ; indeed he seemed chiefly occupied in subjugating and impressing his company. He said little without glancing round from under his eyelids to see its effect ; this look and his expression of uneasy complacency changed only to peevishness or malice. These mannerisms became obvious long before Blanche could record her impression of his outward appearance which she obtained by degrees.

Aymon de Marécourt was a grander edition of his brother, whose blonde and nebulous purity of feature was of the kind associated with the Anglo-Saxon rather than the Gaul. While Baudoïn's hair and whiskers were thin and dustily fair, Aymon was (evidently) conscious of a thick growth of corn-coloured waves ; Baudoïn's eyes were palely flickering, Aymon's large grey-blue orbs metallic and set ; the younger brother's lineaments were definite only in their neatness, the elder's reminiscent of those casts of Greek sculpture used in studios and drawing-classes—null, pinched, battered, and of a vacant regularity. Both were sallow, graceful, smooth, and conscious of rather than confident in their social position ; this was not to be wondered at in view of its underpinning by their neighbour and landlord ; uncertainty showed itself most in the elder brother whose position was more precarious, for on him lay the duty of re-establishing his family by a marriage that brought him nothing but wealth, while Baudoïn was only awaiting the distribution of Aymon's gains to make an ancestral alliance, being in fact unofficially "promised" to a cousin of his mother's.

The Comte de Marécourt's comments on the sewing class were received by Oriana with a calm that did not preclude defence. She did not trouble to invoke Blanche's support, merely repeating the sociological dicta she had acquired, second-hand, from the Reverend William, as if they were her own. She tossed her head

at Aymon's final contemptuous "What results do you expect, may one ask?"—and replied glibly :—

"Every woman should be able to make her own dresses."

"With the help of M. Jean Worth in particular cases, I suppose?"

"My father likes to see me well dressed."

"To you, of course, it is a matter of indifference?"

"No—but I don't wear clothes like this to please myself only. I used to like wearing a peasant's blouse. Now I don't care for it any longer."

"You look charming whatever you wear—" said Aymon with an easy, clock-work gallantry. "Why are we not to have the privilege of seeing you in a peasant's blouse?"

"Because it is not dignified," replied Oriana, with a preening movement of her fan and a total disregard of the look that passed between the two brothers. She looked down at her lilac flounces and continued firmly :—"I shall always wear my Paris dresses for the villagers—and my jewels—" she added, with a teasing glance in Blanche's direction.

"And for us?"

Oriana shrugged her shoulders and did not answer immediately ; then she said as if in a burst of confidence :—"I am going to have a great many new dresses—all very plain, in dark colours."

"Quite a metamorphosis—my mother will be charmed."

Oriana looked suspicious, shut her fan with a snap and was silent. They were now at the end of the terrace—Aymon had been walking ahead with Oriana while his brother gave Blanche an uninterested look and the gesture of offering his arm—where a set of gilt chairs carved into scollop-shells lined a small arbour or temple raised by steps and jutting out from the battlemented walls.

Aymon leaned back against a pillar and fingering his whiskers with a long cream-coloured hand, looked down at his blue frock-coat and grey trousers, and then out across the sea to the mainland. Addressing Blanche for the first time, he informed her that they were high enough up to see beyond the village to the forest of Marécourt and beyond that to the Villa des Oiseaux, his future home. Blanche leaned out and saw the stretch of waving green rise to a building of which she could trace the faint pinkish colour but no more. M. Desmarests had had the woods cut back and the river widened into a lake for its setting, Aymon told her ; the Villa

itself had been erected at the beginning of the last century by one of his forebears. It was plain that he took pride and pleasure in this information, although giving it in a light, condescending tone, as if in sophisticated tolerance of new wealth and its eccentricities. He himself, he added, with a deprecatory gesture, was a collector also in a small way, and had that afternoon been supervising the unpacking and arrangement of some eighteenth-century Sèvres figures he had bought at a sale in Paris. At this point Oriana interrupted him with :—

“Have you paid for them ?”

Aymon raised his eyebrows and tightened his smile ; his brother coughed and looked away. “Certainly I have.”

“Well, you should have let my father see them first. The last you bought were imitations.”

“I don’t—”

“Yes, they were. How much did you pay for these ?”

“Really, the exact sum escapes me at the moment,” replied the young man, his smile now pinched into a grimace. “But does that matter ? The figures are extraordinarily fine.”

“It matters if you’ve been cheated,” persisted Oriana in a more friendly tone than that she had hitherto used. “You don’t want to waste your money, I suppose ?”

M. de Marécourt attempted a laugh, and looked round to share his amusement, but his eye was avoided and he had recourse to a mild simpering as he replied :—“It is so good of you to concern yourself with my trivial purchases—I cannot of course attempt your father’s knowledge of the antique—but these figures happen to be duplicates of some that were made for my great-grandfather before ‘89 and—”

“They are the more likely to be modern copies, then,” interrupted Oriana, in the indifferent tone of one who is on sure ground. “Did they come from England ?”

“As a matter of fact they did. How charmingly intuitive you are.”

“Then they are copies. When some of the old families got away to England they took what they could with them to sell—and some pieces were copied and sold as antiques—I daresay the Marécourts—”

“Your interest in our family is delightfully flattering. I shall

be quite afraid of letting you see my poor little figures now," said Aymon, with another attempt, this time successful, to catch his brother's eye and interchange smiles.

"Mademoiselle is very severe," put in Baudoin, with an imitation of Aymon's mocking suavity.

"Not at all!" exclaimed Oriana, opening her eyes, "I think it's foolish to be cheated—but if you are pleased with the figures—"

"Not enough to justify any more conversation about them," said Aymon languidly. "*My collection will never be famous—but at least it need not be boring.*"

Blanche felt her own colour rise at both the implication and the insolence of the tone, but Oriana looked indifferent; she had said what she could and was quite willing to let the subject alone.

"And when are we to have the pleasure of seeing you at Marécourt?" asked Baudoin, whose duty it sometimes was to begin a fresh conversation.

"I thought you were going back to Paris?" replied Oriana.

"I am, but Aymon will be here for another three weeks."

"Yes," put in Aymon, "there are various matters I have to supervise in connection with the property—now that my father's health—" he broke off, as if gallantly making light of a fateful responsibility. "First the village, then the forest, then back to the village—it's tedious, but necessary."

Blanche felt a little puzzled. Her expression was carefully blank, but Aymon de Marécourt caught her eye and explained with conscious frankness that he was merely an agent for M. Desmaret; again he made the statement with the nonchalant condescension of one giving rather than accepting a favour. He then went on to speak of his life in Paris, describing a gala night at the Opera at which the Emperor and Empress were present, with some amusement at Oriana's eagerness. What was the Empress wearing? Impossible to say, when her jewels covered the whole of her décolletage.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Oriana, "You must have seen something—was it white?"

"I believe so. My eyes weren't glued to their box, I confess. The whole affair was extremely tedious."

Blanche was soon to realise that the last word was the adjective most frequently employed by the Comte de Marécourt. He added:—"I left early—"with a reminiscent yawn, and Oriana said quickly:—

"You would not have been able to make me leave a moment before the end."

"It will be my pleasure to sit out such entertainments—if one can call them that—in your company, when that happy moment arrives."

Oriana put some further questions which he answered as unsatisfactorily, preferring to dwell on the Emperor's sickly appearance, which did not interest her in the least; when he again referred to it with an oblique malice she exclaimed crossly:—

"O! Who cares about that? I want to know what the women's dresses were like—"

"As I have an eye for the kind of thing, it's odd I can't remember more. I must have been hideously bored."

"Next time perhaps you will make a few notes—" suggested his brother with a laugh.

"Let us hope there will not be a next time."

"Certainly there will," announced Oriana.

"That will be quite different. The fact is that these displays are for women and not for bachelors," said Aymon, with the first wholly pleasant glance and smile Blanche had seen him give his betrothed, who had ceased to look in his direction.

So the conversation went on. Aymon sketched a few faint and feeble outlines of his life in the world which he was either unable or unwilling to colour and fill in; indeed the point he seemed most anxious to make was the general tedium of his experiences. Oriana would then stop listening while Baudoin started a new topic which his brother squeezed dry in a few sentences. A great deal of ground was covered in this way, no subject receiving more than a few minutes' attention.

As he was about to leave, Aymon said to his fiancée:—"By the way—I saw Philippe de Caumont yesterday—why have you not been to see them lately?"

Oriana shrugged her shoulders. "They're so dull," she said after a pause.

"Agreed. But they have been your neighbours for the last ten years, and—"

"Did your mother tell you I had not been to visit them?"

Aymon flushed. "Certainly not," he said curtly.

"O! well—I daresay we shall go there before long—" said Oriana indifferently.

"Pray don't exert yourself on my account," said Aymon as he bent over her hand. "The Caumonts are as tedious as most people in this neighbourhood—it's odd that you should have only just discovered it—" and he took his leave.

The day following was Sunday, and when Oriana had gone to Mass Blanche found herself drawn to the library and the re-perusal of the *Almanach de Gotha*. A further study of the Marécourt family might bring her nearer the mood of the dispassionate observer; she had had a sleepless night and consequently distrusted her own judgement.

Her first encounter with Aymon had puzzled and dismayed her. Not in the recapitulation of titles and dates did she hope to see him as a concrete figure, but in a few simple facts, no matter how trivial. Surely he was the hero of her new romance ; yet she could not think of him without disappointment and shrinking.

She discovered that Aymon de Marécourt had been a lieutenant of cavalry and belonged to two clubs in Paris ; there was nothing else that she did not already know. Yet even these two items were something with which to solidify a characterless but somehow disagreeable figure. Blanche sometimes had difficulty in making her heroes and young males effective ; it did not now strike her as odd or incongruous that she was trying to overcome a weakness of presentation, as if Aymon was the protagonist of the story instead of a living creature with whom her powers as a writer had nothing to do.

She leant back and visualised the Comte de Marécourt among his comrades of the regiment ; that was not so difficult : then she saw him in Paris, at the opera, the sale-room and the races ; then at St. Cloud or the Tuileries or in the Hôtel de Marécourt of which Oriana had already told her. Looking into the future, she found it easier to make something of Aymon as master and head of the house ; perhaps she had been mistaken in writing him down as an insipid and faintly spiteful hanger-on.

The chief cause of Blanche's anxiety was the memory of Oriana's total lack of admiration, coquetry, or even dislike ; so there was nothing in this arranged marriage for either party but the fulfilment of Aymon's desire for riches and of Oriana's for going to Paris.

"But of course—what a fool I am !" Blanche suddenly exclaimed aloud. She had quite forgotten the primary object of the union. It was hard to imagine Oriana as a mother, but not impossible :

and Aymon's pride in reproducing himself might fill up the hollows in his personality, drawing him towards Oriana as the mother of his sons.

Like most writers of fiction, Blanche conceived her plots on factual hypotheses and wrote on from there, so to speak ; it therefore never occurred to her that the engagement might be broken off ; to her, the young couple were as bound as if they were already married.

She got up and replaced the *Almanach de Gotha*. She really must try to find something likeable in this unfortunate young man ; no doubt he was sensitive and difficult to know.

At this moment Oriana came in from the chapel, still in her bonnet and gloves. Blanche at once introduced the subject uppermost in her mind.

"Do you really like him ?" Oriana enquired, in a tone of mild surprise.

"I hardly know him yet—but I thought him very handsome."

"Yes—he is good-looking—" said Oriana coolly. "In Paris he is often mistaken for an Englishman."

"Ah ! in Paris—you are looking forward to that, of course—I mean to living there as his wife."

Oriana nodded. There was a pause.

"Tell me—" said Blanche in the subdued yet deliberate tone that she had found most effective with young people, "Have you ever asked the Comte de Marécourt how much time he intends to spend there ?"

"No—but we shall be in Paris all the winter and half the summer, of course—" was the quick answer. "We shall spend no more than three months in the year—less, even—at the Villa."

"That will depend, surely, on your husband's wishes ?"

Oriana had a moment of astonished silence. Then she began in her arrogant, rapid tone :—"I shall tell my father—"

"My dear child, your father will tell you, as I do, that your first obedience is to your husband."

"Then my father can tell Aymon what I mean to do before we are married."

"But suppose he does not in fact care to spend so much time away from his family ?"

Oriana stood quite still while she considered the question ;

then she shrugged her shoulders and said, with a return to the sullen, muttering tone that her association with Blanche had made comparatively rare:—"I shall do what I like—I always do."

"Very well. It is no business of mine, of course."

Oriana said nothing more for a moment or two ; her expression was obdurate and perplexed ; plainly some sort of revolution was taking place in that serene consciousness of wealth and power. She raised her head at last, and said cautiously :—

"Blanche—"

"Yes ?"

"When I am married, you—will you—"

"I hope I shall see you often."

"No ! No !" Oriana burst out in a loud sobbing tone. She stamped her foot and her eyes filled with tears. "I knew you would say that ! You must live with us—I shall always want you—you must promise—please !" She flung herself on her knees and seizing both Blanche's hands, shook them frantically. "You must ! You must !" she repeated.

Blanche looked down at her with a thoughtful expression. Then she said gently :—"You will have much to fill your married life—at least, so I hope and believe."

"But—"

"Stay—consider a moment. When are you going to be married ?"

"In five or six months."

"I see. During that time I shall be with you, I promise it. But afterwards—that again must depend on the Comte de Marécourt. He may not want me to share his home."

"My father—"

"Oriana, your father cannot buy you everything. When you are married—don't you understand ?—you must make your husband love you—then—"

Oriana looked suddenly furtive and mischievous through her tears ; she rubbed her eyes and said, half to herself :—"I know. Being married—will be quite different from living at Yssimbault."

It was impossible to assess all that the tone, partly dreamy and partly amused, implied. Oriana had released Blanche's hands ; now she stood up. She took off her bonnet and smoothed out its shining strings ; she seemed so thoughtful that Blanche was surprised to hear her say in a considering voice :—

"If Aymon was—pleased with me—" she smiled—"he would do—*everything* I wanted."

There was a pause while Blanche rather doubtfully let this new train of thought sink into place. Then she said gently :—

"I am sure he admires you."

"But you want me to pretend to listen to him," said Oriana with a sudden clear look, "even when he talks about his faked china Is that what you mean?"

"Well—surely you were a little unkind?"

"Ah! you think I don't know—my father told you to make me always polite and smiling, like an old lady—like Mlle Riquet-Toustain—" exclaimed Oriana, extremely pleased with her own perspicacity. "I could see you were shocked yesterday. I was thinking of you, not of him—he's so silly."

"If you never think of him, how can you be sure of that?"

Oriana looked very much amused. "You want me to listen to him?"

"Would it not be for your happiness?"

"Perhaps. Well—I will, then—and you will be with us when I am married?"

"You must ask M. de Marécourt—not now—" as Oriana began to speak, "but later on when we have seen each other a little more."

"You mean, you don't care for him? It's a big house—you will have all your own rooms, as you do here."

"O! dear—how often must I bring you back to the point? *He* may not like *me*."

"He likes no one," said Oriana with an air of finality and a brilliant smile: and laughing at Blanche's confounded look she ran out of the room.

CHAPTER II *A Delicate Subject*

"IT is not your fault, Mademoiselle," said Jean Desmarests, "if you are not yet aware of how you are placed. There has been no one to explain things except my daughter—eh?"

"And yourself," put in Blanche with a smile.

M. Desmarests gave her one of his piercing blank looks that seemed to absorb all she felt while giving nothing in return. They were sitting in a long low gallery, lined with enormous gilded and mirrored brackets that he had had made in England from a Chippendale design ; on these were some hundreds of china figures of all sizes ; this was M. Desmarests' eighteenth century European collection in the porcelain whose glaze he had imitated so cheaply in his own factories.

Blanche had come to dread their weekly talks in the porcelain gallery, for here her employer's attention constantly strayed to the objects surrounding him. Now he got up, took a turn round the room and picked out a little Bow negress, half closing his eyes as he ran his fingers over her curves and the points in her diadem. She made one of a set of the four continents, he broke off to explain—Africa—and he pointed out the spear in her hand and the lion at her feet.

Blanche made a formally appreciative comment and looked severe. M. Desmarests put back the figure with a sigh.

"Mademoiselle—" he began, with a hesitation that was unusual enough for Blanche to look up at him in surprise, "I have to find fault with you. Why were you not with my daughter when the Comte de Marécourt and his brother came to call?"

"I was with them—not from the beginning, that is—"

"You joined them on the terrace half an hour or so later?"

"Yes—but—"

"Mademoiselle, this is not England. In France, as you must know, young girls in my daughter's position are not left unchaperoned, even for half an hour."

There was a pause, in which Blanche denied herself the obvious retort and contemplated her employer whose expression she could almost read. Was it possible that he was embarrassed—even distressed? His mechanical smoothness had disappeared ; she was too much taken aback to do more than murmur an apology, which he interrupted with :

"Come—what are you thinking?"

"I did not know that these—customs—prevailed, in the case of a—of someone who—"

"They have known each other all their lives—is that what you mean?"

"I don't know, Monsieur—have they?"

"Have you my daughter's confidence? She tells you everything, I understand."

"I thought she did," said Blanche simply, "but the fact remains that she never mentioned M. de Marécourt to me till you did. When I asked her about our visit there she—" Blanche paused, for M. Desmarest's glance was again sliding away from hers—"she was extremely reserved. Later on she told me that she was betrothed, and to whom. I confess I was amazed—at least—"

"Amazed? At what?"

"She had spoken so freely to me of all her thoughts and feelings. Yet till the subject arose of itself, there had been no word of the family—who—whose—"

"And what do you make of it?"

"I am quite at a loss. There seemed no reason to conceal—"

"None—none—she conceals nothing that interests her. She has always known that she was to marry Aymon. They seldom met, of course—I saw to that."

Blanche was silent. Her employer gave her another penetrating look and began to walk up and down, throwing out his explanation in jerky sentences.

"The Roncesvaulx still have a little property in Provence—the children were brought up there. Marécourt has been mine for some twenty years now—I have kept it up on the understanding that the boys only spent a month of each year in the neighbourhood. Young people in England are brought up together in the nursery, I know—that is not our way. Oriana and Aymon have met seldom and conversed hardly at all since he left his regiment and occupied himself with the estate here. She has known his father and mother well—as well as they can be known—" his eyes dropped as if to conceal contempt—"since she was a baby. If I had let the old woman rule the roost—as she assumed I would when my wife died—they might have brought her up as their own child, even though it was against their traditions. I sometimes believe—in spite of everything—that I should have allowed it. What do you think?"

"I don't yet know what the circumstances were. There is something you have not told me, I think," Blanche replied.

"You are right, Mademoiselle. There is something you should know. The difficulty is, how to tell you."

"There need be none."

"Is it true that your father was a man of advanced ideas? Mme de Roncesvaux seemed to think so."

This sudden twist silenced Blanche for a moment. Then she said slowly:—"My father was a man of wide views—though they were not lax, according to any standards."

"And you? Would you describe yourself as a woman of the world?" pursued M. Desmarests with a hard smile.

"Not of yours, Monsieur. But you need not go on. I think I know what you are trying to tell me."

Jean Desmarests stopped in his walk and screwed up his mouth. He seemed at the same time put out and amused. "Indeed? Perhaps you will be so good as to explain?"

"The subject which I believe you are trying to raise is one very distasteful to me. I should prefer not to discuss it."

"And if I insist?"

Jean Desmarests pulled out his watch, shrugged his shoulders and bent his sardonic and impatient gaze on Blanche's lowered head and folded hands. She looked up, and said coldly:—

"If you insist, I can only reply that M. de Marécourt's past adventures—the expenditure and the habits of a young man of his calibre—have no place in my care of your daughter." Drawing herself up and speaking more composedly, she continued:—"I imagine you wish to tell me that they are of the past. If they were not—"

She was interrupted by an exclamation, a sound of impatient mirth; M. Desmarests muttered something unintelligible and then said shortly:—

"Mademoiselle Blanche—if I may call you that?—you must forgive me. I forgot I was talking to a writer of romances. Your imagination travels quicker than my tongue. Don't be offended—" Blanche had risen with a look of annoyance—"Sit down, and listen to me. I have not much time—none for the delicacy that is due to English ladies. We shall never understand one another unless I speak plainly."

He paused. Then he said with a deliberation that was at the same time scornful and emphatic:—"As you say, I have nothing to do with the past follies of M. de Marécourt. No doubt he has had

his *cocodettes*, *lionnes*, as it is the fashion to call them nowadays, like other young men, though I never heard anything of it. No. What I must tell you is this. The Duc de Roncesvaulx has a mistress —Mme de Freysac—have you heard of her? She has had a house on the mainland for nearly twenty years.”

As the painful colour rose to Blanche’s cheeks she continued to look at her employer. She did not let her gaze falter, nor did she reply except by a shake of the head. M. Desmarests turned away and went on speaking over his shoulder.

“Such relationships can become what one might call institutions. There are however some inconvenient differences about this one. Mme de Freysac has money—not a great deal, but enough to make her independent. I don’t know what her attachment to Roncesvaulx is worth—nothing that I can give her.”

He seemed to be speaking to himself; there was now neither contempt nor bitterness in his tone which was one of practical assessment. He appeared unaware of Blanche’s disciplined attention as he continued smoothly :—

“Such women like power—she seems to find hers in defying my long expressed wish that she should take herself off—to Provence, or to Paris. I will say this for her, that she is a woman of tact and education—she has kept out of my daughter’s way till now. In fact I am sure that the child does not know of her existence—do you think she does?”

“She has never spoken of her to me.”

“Yes—well—the fact remains that this woman considers herself a part of the Roncesvaulx household. She dines with the family once or twice a week and entertains them in return. I believe she helped to pay Aymon’s debts when they were too much for his father. I dislike her of course, as I dislike all such creatures. Where I come from we had no use for these barren, idle women —however, that is not the point I wished to make to you.” He paused and then added in a harsher, more rapid voice :—“You must be careful—that is what I had to tell you. Zoë de Freysac is informed of everything you do. It was through her spies in this house—I cannot tell you who they are, I don’t waste my time with that sort of thing—that I was told you were remiss in your guardianship of my daughter. In fact I am perfectly satisfied with you, Mademoiselle—but at this moment, that is until Oriana is married,

I desire that neither of those old women should have cause to pick holes in her behaviour."

"Neither—"

"I am speaking of Mme de Roncesvaulx—naturally the Freysac and she are hand in glove, after all these years."

Blanche got up ; she put one hand against the mantelpiece as if to steady herself ; but the gesture was one of shrinking and repulsion. Her employer said briskly :—

"I thought this would happen. You are disgusted—you wish to leave—is that so ?"

There was a long silence. This was the time for Blanche to recall her vows, and after a few moments she was able to do so. She said in a low voice :—

"No, Monsieur. I have no intention of leaving."

"Good. I am obliged to you. Now—I will explain the immediate situation. Some years ago Mme de Freysac offered herself as tenant for the Villa des Oiseaux, which had then stood empty for more than two generations. This woman no doubt considered herself very ill used when I ignored her attempt on my daughter's future home, for the Villa was built during the Regency by Hippolyte de Roncesvaulx for a mistress who ruined him. Madame still has her eye on it—she thinks that by cajolery or impudence she will get the present Duc de Roncesvaulx to give it her. As it happens to be my property—am I making myself clear ?"

"I think so."

"Very well. I see that this conversation is painful to you, Mademoiselle—but I have nearly finished. As my daughter and her husband will shortly be moving into the Villa, Zoë de Freysac has turned her attentions—not for the first time, perhaps, but that is not my business—from the father to the son. She is working on Aymon to persuade his parents to go back to Provence—then he and Oriana are to live at Marécourt while she installs herself at the Villa—you see the scheme?—humiliating and subjugating the young woman as she did the old one. A very pretty idea."

There was a pause.

"I should have thought—" said Blanche, in a carefully expressionless voice, "that you need have no anxiety. The house is yours—M de Marécourt will be your tenant, surely?"

"It is a part of my daughter's dowry. But you have seen what

she is—she thinks only of going to Paris. Aymon has but to bribe her with that, and she will be perfectly willing to leave the Villa to Mme de Freysac for three-quarters of the year.”

“Have you no jurisdiction over the tenancy?”

“Of course. But if they all combine in what they choose to call a friendly agreement, who is to stop them?”

“Then you would assert your authority as a father, would you not?”

“Quite useless, once my daughter is married. It depends on her, and—now I come to my second point—on you.”

He waited. Blanche made no comment, and he went on:—

“I can see how unwilling you are to have anything to do with it. The fact remains that my daughter must be protected—Aymon is incapable of it—and I shall be far from here as soon as the wedding is over. I am going to Russia to start a factory near St. Petersburg, and shall be away six months. Well—I know that money will not buy you. I am in your hands. Will you stay with my daughter until it becomes clear to Zoë de Freysac that she has nothing to do in this neighbourhood? You can think it over, and then tell me.”

“What do you expect of me if I do stay?” said Blanche at last.

“You know what your influence is with the child—make her see that Zoë de Freysac is her enemy—if we throw her weight in the scale the battle is half won.”

“Why should I do this? Why do you ask me?”

“Because there is no one else. I think you are fond of Oriana. I want you to help me.”

“And you, Monsieur? What have you ever done for your daughter?”

“You mean, I should have married again?”

“I mean that you have brought up your child without the best and strongest *natural* protection—a sense of right and wrong. That would have kept her from harm—that, and her conscience. You have done nothing to develop either.”

During the silence that followed both speakers looked at each other rather blankly. Jean Desmarests shrugged his shoulders. “You don’t understand our methods,” he said with unusual mildness.

“Why then do you appeal to mine?”

"I can't answer that without discourtesy. You see, I am frank with you. Will you consent to think it over?"

Blanche turned away and walked over to the window. All her life she remembered the picture of sea and sky, and the circling gulls ; the day was stormy and they were beating inland against the wind with harsh cries of lamentation, almost, it seemed, of warning. She was still very angry ; but above her vexation rose a creeping, gnawing wish to hear more. She spoke at last from the depths of her strongest instinct without any awareness of what she was saying.

"What is she like ? What sort of a woman is she ?"

There was a moment's silence in which Jean Desmarests overcame his astonishment. Then he said abruptly :—

"Cultured—lively—what you call notable, in England. She has never been beautiful—but of course—well, you will see. She has made herself indispensable in more ways than one. She knows the value of money as well as how to spend it—a very rare combination."

"I should like to see her—" said Blanche in a slow, avid tone that her employer hardly recognised ; she seemed to be speaking to herself ; he made no comment, watching her shrewdly. Then she turned and said rather coldly :—

"There is no need for me to consider. I will stay with your daughter as long as she needs me."

During the next few moments she submitted to his thanks. The rest of their conversation was short, for they were anxious to be quit of one another. M. Desmarests' wish was that chaperoned and protected by Blanche, Oriana was to be allowed to meet Mme de Freysac and to hear from the Englishwoman their respective positions. It was obvious that the ageing siren (Mme de Freysac was known to have passed her forty-fifth year) would conceal her fear of Oriana's youth and beauty with all the arts of flattery and complaisance. It would be for Blanche to counteract her influence, and to warn the girl—but here Blanche interrupted. She would not bind herself to any specified behaviour until she had seen more of the situation ; then, she added, conscience would be her guide. M. Desmarests politely declared that he required no better assurance : and he hurried away before she had time to express any further disapproval.

She was left then to co-ordinate all she had heard into a new picture—that of the bold, coarse, managing, painted courtesan, insolent, contemptuous or wheedling, according to her needs. This was the test for which Blanche had been waiting ; she was pleased to see that after a moment's sick disgust she did not shrink from it—nor did she for a single instant distrust the curious exultation that poured through her as she submitted herself to the ordeal.

"How happy you look !" exclaimed Oriana when they were together in Blanche's sitting-room a few hours later, "At least—not happy exactly, but—"

"Well ?" said Blanche, putting her finger through one of Oriana's curls.

"I'm not sure—as if you were looking forward to something—are you ?"

"Not exactly," replied Blanche, withdrawing her hand, her look suddenly cold and reserved.

"I know ! You have heard about to-night—what a pity ! I meant it to be a surprise."

"A surprise ?"

"Yes—a new dish—chicken in half-mourning—who told you ?"

"I promise you I knew nothing of what we were going to have for supper."

"What is it, then ? You are excited about something—my father said he thought you would soon be starting a new book." As Blanche shook her head the girl continued eagerly :—"Won't you tell me ? Is it something very nice ? Your cheeks are quite pink. What did you and papa talk about all that time ?"

"About our visit of to-morrow."

"O !—Marécourt—do you really want to go there ?"

"Do not you ?"

"Their cook is not like ours, you know. She's an old peasant from the village. She does make a *pâté* that's not bad."

"Who else will be there—besides the family ?"

"I don't know—they don't see many people—it's quite a small house," replied Oriana with her arrogant air.

"The Château ? I thought—"

"O ! that was burnt down in '92—this is really the older house,

built before the Château. It's nothing to look at—but I remember English people always think it's wonderful."

"And you?" enquired Blanche with a smile.

"I like the Villa best—it's by Blondel—and Got did the decorations—but you've never heard of either of them," said Oriana with a mischievous glance.

"No, I never have."

"Marécourt is such a gloomy place—I hate it—in fact when the old people are both dead, I think we shall pull it down," declared the young lady.

"I thought you intended to spend all your time in Paris?"

"Well—the children will have to live in the country, won't they?"

As she wondered for the twentieth time how well her pupil was informed on these and other such subjects, Blanche was silent ; and Oriana, well aware that her light-hearted reference was considered tasteless, gave her companion a pat on the knee as if to placate her.

Blanche knew that this was the moment to begin on her task ; with an ejaculatory and fervent request for inspiration, she said :—

"When I was talking with your father about our visit to Marécourt, I heard that there would in fact be someone else there besides the family—a lady whom they have long been intimate with, unknown to either of us."

"A cousin or an aunt, I suppose? The place is full of their poor relations—" said Oriana, bored. "O! I was going to ask you—my dead-leaf dress has just come—shall I wear it? I'll get it now for you to see."

"In a moment," said Blanche, swallowing her irritation. "This lady is not one of the poor relations—she is—an old friend, almost, one might say, one of the family." Forcing down the lump in her throat, she continued :—"It is—rather a sad story." She waited.

"Well—go on, then," said Oriana languidly.

Blanche collected herself and said slowly :—"You are marrying into a great family, Oriana—have you ever studied their history?" As the girl shook her head she went on with gathering fluency :—"Such ancient and noble names stand for much—chivalry—" Oriana stifled a yawn—"power, extravagance, selfishness—even dishonour. People in the position of the de Roncesvaulx have many temptations—and you and I should be the last to condemn them for having

succumbed. My father used to say that we should judge no sin until we had ourselves committed it—well, here is a case where we must neither judge nor condemn.”

Oriana looked slightly bewildered ; but the introduction of the Reverend William led her to believe that this opening might blossom into one of those fascinating stories of Blanche’s early life, and she fixed her eyes on the older woman with a murmur of agreement and sympathy.

“The Duc de Roncesvaulx,” Blanche continued, “cannot always have been happy—” Oriana’s face fell and she reached for her box of bonbons—“He has lost money, position, friends. His daughter, whom he may have loved the best of his children—”

“I’ve seen her—she was very ugly—” put in Oriana, her mouth full.

“He may not have thought so—are you listening to me ?” replied Blanche with undiminished patience. “He may have been as lonely without her as—” she suppressed a personal allusion, and went on rather confusedly :—“But we know that a man who might have had great possessions and power and has been deprived of them through no fault of his own, is much to be pitied.” She stopped again. The distress in her tone rather than her words now caught Oriana’s ear ; her eyes were fixed on the Englishwoman who continued firmly :—“You are soon to be married. It is time you should know that all marriages are not, cannot be happy ones. This was the case of Aymon’s father.”

There was a long silence. Oriana’s expression was now one of concentrated interest. She finished her sweet, forgot to take another and let the box slip from her knee to the floor.

“Many years ago,” went on Blanche, her tone as dreamy and absorbed as if she were outlining the plot of a new story, “the Duc de Roncesvaulx as a young married man, met a woman whom he loved and who loved him.”

Oriana’s eyes flashed ; this is a romance, she seemed to say, like one of your own novels : and not displeased with her effect, Blanche pursued :—“He was not rich or powerful then, as you know. He was poor, proud and forgotten. Nothing he did seemed to matter much—his wife was busy in her nursery—” Blanche quickly substituted her original portrait of Mme de Roncesvaulx for this tenderer portrayal, “—and he needed all the other woman could

give him. She also—" the narrator gulped and then went on in a higher voice, "—left the life she had built up in Paris, where she was happy and had many friends, to follow her lover. She may have been wrong—but who can judge her?"

Oriana drew a long breath. "She really loved him, then?" she enquired.

"Yes—I think she did. She has loved him for nearly twenty years."

There was a long silence. Oriana gave Blanche an intense, astonished glance and mechanically bent down to pick up the sweetmeats which had rolled under her chair. Her silence, her lack of outward response, were signs of strong feeling ; Blanche unconsciously relaxed her upright pose, leaning back and watching her audience.

"How did you hear all this?" said Oriana at last.

"Your father told me."

Oriana looked at the ground ; she seemed utterly dumbfounded. She is more sensitive than I had imagined, thought Blanche. Still she judged it best to wait for the next question.

"It's very odd—" said the girl, her expression now quite dazed, "I mean—that I didn't know—I thought—"

"What, dear child? Is there anything more that I can tell you?"

"I suppose not. I only thought—it's so queer. You see, I didn't know—" she fell into deliberation.

"What?"

"That there were two of them."

Too intent to notice Blanche's frozen look, she leaned forward and whispered :—"Tell me—does Zoë de Freysac know about this other woman?"

The confused scene of explanation that followed was one of violent and astonished hilarity on the part of Oriana. Mme de Freysac ! *Old Zoë!* Why, everybody—she interrupted herself at the sight of Blanche's stricken expression.

"How could I know you meant her? You made it sound so different—are you angry with me?"

It was impossible for Blanche to reply immediately. She remained silent while Oriana repeated the question.

"No—" she said at last in a low voice, turning her face away.

"It is myself I should be angry with—I might have guessed you would know her."

"But I don't know her!" Oriana exclaimed, "I never said so, did I? I've seen her—I'm not allowed to meet her."

"Where have you seen her?"

"Let me think—the last time was a year ago. She was leaving Marécourt for Paris, and I was riding with the Caumonts—they had to pretend not to see Zoë, as I was there." Oriana giggled faintly. "I didn't mind—Victoire de Caumont looked very silly."

"How long have you—who—"

"But, Blanche—*everybody* knows about her—she's lived here since before I was born."

"I see."

"Please—please don't be sad. It was a lovely story—and after all, it might become true—he might meet another lady one of these days, and then—what's the matter?"

Blanche got up hastily. Her own sense of the ridiculous had suddenly come to life: yet dignity forbade her sharing Oriana's amusement. She stifled a slightly hysterical laugh, feeling her cheeks crimson as her pupil's astonished gaze followed her across the room.

"I have been extremely foolish," she said at last, without turning round. "We won't waste any more time. I should simply have told you that Mme de Freysac will be there to-morrow."

Oriana said meditatively:—"I wondered if I was going to meet her. Is it because I'm going to be married?"

"My dear child—"

"You don't think I should? Is that it?"

"I don't know what to say to you. How much do you know?"

"I know she's the old man's mistress—at least, she was—"

Oriana seemed to deliberate, eyeing Blanche cautiously; then she went on in a light, informative tone:—"Her husband was a General de Freysac. She was left a widow when she was eighteen. Her mother was a Russian. She is in Paris a great deal, but she always spends the summer here in the old farmhouse that Aymon's father first gave her when she came to Marécourt. She's got a library—and a parrot—let me see, what else?"

"Listen, Oriana—" said Blanche suddenly, bending down and putting her hand on the girl's shoulder, "You need not meet this

woman. You are not obliged to. Your father seems to think it necessary, but I—”

Oriana looked up curiously. “But I want to meet her—don’t you?”

There ensued a very long silence indeed. Blanche’s eyes did not leave Oriana’s face. Then she said in a low voice, as if the words were forced out of her:—“Yes—I do.”

“Well, then—it’s all arranged, isn’t it?”

Blanche moved away and sat down; all at once she felt very tired. “Yes, I suppose it is,” she admitted.

“Now—shall I wear the new dress? You see, I want to look my best.”

“I can understand that. But first—why have you concealed so much from me?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why did your father tell me about your marriage, and not you? Why did you send me to the library for instruction, instead of telling me yourself about the de Roncesvaulx? And now, why have you allowed me to make a fool of myself before telling me that you knew all about this woman?”

“Well—I will tell you. You see—” Oriana smiled—“You think I’m quite ignorant—but I have met English ladies. There were four here, altogether. When I told the first one—I was twelve—about marrying Aymon, she was horrified—yes!—shocked—and I thought if I—don’t you see? I wanted you so much to stay ever after that first day when I was rude, and so—you see how it was—”

“You thought I should be shocked too and leave, if I heard all you knew?”

“Yes. Of course—” hastily—“you are quite different from those others. But I thought it would be safer to wait a little.”

“I think you had better let me hear all the worst now,” said Blanche with a faint smile. “Is there anything else in store for me?”

“No—well, now there’s old Zoë—” said Oriana with a spurt of laughter. “O! dear—” she broke off with a guilty look at Blanche’s expression, and then added eagerly, “I’m not going to like her—I never like old women.”

On this not very promising note Blanche judged it best to end the conversation. During the course of that day she dissuaded

Oriana from wearing the over-sophisticated gown she had chosen for the visit, and on the morning of departure helped to dress her in the panoply of conquest.

Blanche had decided that her pupil's youth must be emphasised. She now applied herself to dressing Oriana with all the attention to detail that a long training in written descriptions had given her. White seemed too obvious, and was besides the frequent and cunning choice of the elderly charmer ; pink or lilac were an easy background for a beauty so unusual. It was therefore, after hesitating over palest green and deep yellow that she chose an oyster silk enriched with creamy Italian embroideries and dark grey velvet ribbons that turned Oriana's skin to gold and her eyes to a gleaming agate between their silky fringes.

The jewels were the next question. Finally both Blanche and Oriana agreed on a necklace of small square emeralds with earrings and bracelets to match. A wide Leghorn hat, after the Winterhalter portrait of the Empress, trimmed with a fringed scarf of brilliant green moiré, mittens and fan of Brussels lace, a tiny white pagoda of a parasol, and the heroine was ready, springing curls faintly perfumed, her hands pink with scrubbing. With a strange, half-amused docility she had followed all Blanche's suggestions ; or perhaps for once French and English taste had risen to the occasion in the same manner.

CHAPTER 12 *The Visit*

BLANCHE now occupied herself with some more fundamental aspects of Oriana's appearance than those of dress and ornament while her charge frowned at the Englishwoman's lecture on social behaviour. What did it matter ? The Roncesvaulx were used to her by now—who cared about them ? She would eat and speak as she chose. Blanche decided that the moment had come to speak brutally or not at all.

"I am well aware," she said, "that our hosts have long accustomed themselves to the table manners that you share with your monkey and your dog. No doubt they still think of you as a child."

As the girl began to protest she added :—"Neither your beauty nor your fashionable dress will conceal what you really are—you know that as well as I do."

Oriana looked more astounded than hurt ; it was the first time that Blanche had employed a tone at once so personal and so bitter.

"It rests with you," Blanche continued more gently, "as to whether your future husband is ashamed of you in front of his father's mistress. The approval of this woman should be nothing to either of us. But we have both accepted the circumstances—and naturally I should wish you to appear at your best—" Oriana instinctively looked down at her dress—"and no finery will save you from ridicule unless you take the trouble to protect yourself by ladylike and suitable manners."

In the pause that followed Blanche gave her pupil a long affectionate look ; then she left the room, disgusted with herself for setting up Mme de Freysac as rival and critic.

The day of the visit was windless and heavy with mist ; by noon the slow autumn sunshine had sucked up all the moisture. The sea spread round Yssimbault like a grey silk quilt, melting into a sky of polished silver ; the smoke from the chimneys on the mainland rose into thin quivering columns.

Some minutes after they were due to set off from the Castle there was a search for Oriana ; then a maid came to say that Mademoiselle had been found in the chapel. This caused Blanche another pang ; she guessed that she had undermined her pupil's self-confidence and she distrusted, as deeply as was natural for one of her spiritual trend, the superstitious tendencies that were now bringing the girl to her knees. She said nothing as they drove through the village. When they were seated opposite each other in the launch, Oriana exclaimed :—

"How lucky that I remembered ! Did you know it was Saint Lucia's feast-day?" As Blanche shook her head she continued :—"She is not my particular saint, of course—but I can get her to do most things." Glancing aside at her companion, she added with a pouting look :—"But if you are going to be cross and disagreeable—"

"I spoke very unpleasantly just now—" interrupted Blanche, laying her hand on Oriana's. "You know, I think, that I disliked doing so."

"Well, you will see—suppose I were to behave like Mary Cathcart in that book of yours. She was queenly—do you remember?"

Blanche smiled ; and Oriana gave herself up to her own thoughts which seemed to amuse her a good deal.

At last they reached the mainland where the carriage was waiting for them. Ten minutes later they passed through an avenue of chestnuts to a crumbling gateway whose lichenized posts supported a pair of dilapidated stone mermaids, sitting back on their tails, a toothless comb in one hand, and a fragmentary mirror in the other.

"Verrio—" said Oriana, with a wave of the hand, apparently now unperturbed and ready to show off her knowledge. Blanche gave her a puzzled look ; whether this composure was the result of Saint Lucia's amiability or of an upbringing she could only deplore, she had no notion.

Now a dirty staring child in a black blouse ran to push open the rusty gates and they drove on into the park. Here most of the larger trees had been cut down and there were no new plantations. The avenue swept on into a vast open space, the site of the destroyed Château of which not a trace remained ; weeds and coarse grass covered even the outlines of ruin. It was plain that Jean Desmarests had cared to spend little or nothing on this part of the property.

Now they turned away from the main avenue into a thickly wooded bridle path opening out into a cobbled sweep round a fountain. Here an armless nymph gazed dejectedly into a mass of livid green : a trickle from her cracked jar indicated that some attempt had been made to start the waters playing ; but they hardly disturbed the greasy verdure that spread between the broken shell-work and the bitten mossy rim of the basin.

The present dwelling of the Roncesvaulx was a seventeenth-century, gabled block of a house with a slate-roofed turret at each corner, mansard roof, and thickly creepered walls ; there was a spurious romanticism that had been superimposed by poverty and neglect ; and one could pity but not admire the effort to keep up that had placed a crowned, crudely coloured Madonna and Child in cheap faience in the scolloped niche above the doorway.

In spite of their draperies the windows seemed blind and empty ; so deserted and forgotten was the whole aspect of the house that Blanche expected no answer but an echoing silence when the foot-

man sprang down to pull at the bell ; then the door was opened, not by the decrepit retainer of her imagination but by a raw youth of sixteen or seventeen, whose livery gaped and strained as he ushered them in. He grinned as Oriana nodded at him ; then he went before them into an arched hall whose cobwebbed Italian chimney-piece, heavy walnut beams and ancient bits of armour gave it the same falsely antique atmosphere as that of the façade ; those rusted swords and spears and coats of mail seemed to have been carefully disinterred from a sepulchral dust so as to give visitors that sense of the past associated rather with a museum than a home.

Blanche had only a moment or two to feel the dissatisfaction caused by her first glance ; she turned to see Oriana loosening the strings of her cloak while the young footman edged round her to the double doors at the end of the hall. As he opened them Oriana pushed past him, her hand on Blanche's arm ; she seemed impatient and contemptuous and while they were walking along a carpetless gallery hung with dark portraits and faded tapestry, she explained that her usual custom of running through the house to the garden had been cancelled by Mme de Roncesvaulx' sudden insistence on ceremony. "I know the way !" she presently exclaimed to the youth at their heels, and wheeling sharply, she led Blanche through a tall glass door on to a wooden verandah, whose white painted trellises proclaimed it of modern design.

The balcony of the verandah divided in the middle to a flight of steps. Beyond these were stretches of turf, watched over by a set of broken-nosed statues in veinous marble. There were two or three flower-beds, and pairs of sickly flowering shrubs in earthenware jars marked the descent of the terraces.

Blanche was at once aware of some moving figures at the end of the furthest terrace, but before she could look again, Aymon de Marécourt, who had been sitting with his feet on the balcony, had got up and come towards her. His manner as a host was more assured ; he greeted Oriana as if he were glad to see her : he placed chairs for his guests with something like alacrity, hovered with cushions and opened their parasols for them without any of the languor and self-consciousness he had shown at Yssimbault.

Blanche was placed behind a pillar that blocked her view of the garden ; she resigned herself to this and turned her attention to

M. de Marécourt, who was apologising for the absence of his brother. Baudoin had left for Provence ; his godmother, from whom he had expectations, had summoned him to her death-bed—lucky fellow !

“Who is she ?” said Oriana sharply.

“Ah—let me see—” said Aymon ; his fiancée’s tone caused an immediate reassumption of his insolent manner, “Clothilde-Aldégonde de Méré—I don’t think you know her.”

Blanche abandoned the attempt to look interested and peered furtively round the pillar. She could only see the footman striding along in search of his mistress. Then three figures came in sight and her view was blocked again as the servant approached them. At last he fell back ; but the Duc de Roncesvaulx had taken his place, his heavy body partly shutting out the shapes of his wife and another lady. As he began to walk towards them Blanche sat back ; when he opened the conversation Blanche’s manner seemed to alarm him a little. She was now in full view of the terraces ; she looked down and saw Mme de Roncesvaulx and her companion.

Blanche was deeply disappointed. She saw that Mme de Freysac was not, after all, to be of the party. This little, pale, faded lady, with smooth bands of sandy hair, a narrow, sallow face and deep-set eyes, must be one of the poor relations to whom Oriana had contemptuously referred ; that was indicated by her untrimmed black silk, the dress of the poor relation in all circles, her sad, infrequent smile and the look of delicacy and breeding that showed her to be one of the family. Poor thing, thought Blanche pityingly, telling herself how relieved she was that the dreaded meeting was put off, if only for a little while.

Now Mme de Roncesvaulx and her companion were quite near, and Blanche could see the fragile lines of the other lady’s face, her high bony forehead and the darting brightness of her glance. Her ungloved hands were long and beautiful. Blanche could not but disapprove of the unconventionality that caused this apparently intelligent and sensitive aunt or cousin—a spinster surely, for she was capless—to walk out of doors without a hat or a parasol, although certainly she was past the age for considering her complexion. As she came nearer Blanche perceived the faint freckles on the flattish nose and the worn, sunburnt look of the hands and wrists. This woman knew what work was ; no elegant, trifling hanger-on could have shown hands like those.

All at once Blanche realised that she had ceased to pay any attention to her host ; he and Oriana and Aymon too, had stopped talking : they fixed their eyes on the approaching ladies.

A suspicion, cold and horrifying, crept into Blanche's brain. Now the Duchesse de Roncesvaulx had reached the verandah and her voice struck into the silence.

"Mme de Freysac—I have the honour to present to you Mlle Peverence and Mlle Desmarests."

The slender lady curtsied deeply and flowingly ; her glance flickered from Oriana to Blanche and back again.

The next few minutes were unforgettable and humiliating for Blanche. She had created a stereotyped portrait, one that was recognisable everywhere ; whenever she remembered that first meeting she must see herself as a producer of the obvious and the sensation was very unpleasant, even in memory.

No more unsubtle and insensitive than most authors of fiction, Blanche was not yet at the stage where her spectacles had become blinkers. She could still take in a new conception when squarely faced with it, and she saw at once how simple and harmless her image had been as compared with the reality. She saw also why Oriana's inexperience had dismissed this woman as a rival.

Zoë de Freysac was worn and elderly ; possibly she had never been beautiful, even in youth. Yet it did not take Blanche very long to perceive how naïve were the standards that eliminated that low plaintive voice, the sudden smile, the precise and natural movements—in such pleasant contrast to the darting, swooning and flouncing of most women—the quiet manner, the range of subtle and amusing allusion, all the weapons in fact of sophisticated culture, which this lady wielded so gracefully. Her simple dress, the old-fashioned locket and ring which were her only jewels, the straight silky hair bound back with a thin black ribbon made contemporary modishness seem insistent and heavy. Mme de Freysac was not one of those of whom the onlooker says, "She must have been—" It was impossible to imagine her younger, older, pretty, ugly or anything but what she was, an ageless figurine, a delicate and self-possessed woman of the world.

When Mme de Freysac had made her curtsies she seemed to efface herself. The Duc de Roncesvaulx began to tease Oriana, his hand on her shoulder. Was it true that she had become

extremely serious in the last few weeks? Had she brought her needlework with her?—and so on. His wife struck in representively:—

“An excellent idea—it is never too late to begin these things. When you are married you will find them your best resource.”

“What a mournful conception of married life!” said Aymon with a drawling intonation and Oriana tittered faintly. Encouraged, he proceeded:—“You don’t set the example, Madame—when does one see you at your embroidery?”

“I have other interests,” said his mother coldly. “Oriana does not care for the books I read.”

“I only read novels”—said Oriana absently; she was staring at Mme de Freysac, who turned to say:—

“Mademoiselle is fortunate—she lives in an age of great story-tellers. When I was a girl there was nothing for the young lady but Walter Scott—now”—she broke off, smiling at Blanche, who looked confused and replied:—

“Most young people would be better employed reading Walter Scott than the modern authors, I think.”

“He is fuller of information than of romance,” Aymon put in.

“Ah yes—but the young people of to-day live their romances—we only read and dreamed of ours”—said Mme de Freysac with an arch sad look.

Her tone, gentle and mocking, made the subject a personal one. It was curious to see the effect on the two men. The father looked pleased and regretful, seeming to share a memory; the son took on a preening expression. Meanwhile Blanche perceived in Mme de Freysac’s timid look at her hostess all the tribute that was required.

The subject of the modern novel was continued. Aymon declared that the French writers attempted too much. His mother said that she found the realism of the present day little to her taste; even as a young married woman she would have been forbidden the books one now saw lying about in every household. Blanche began to feel a little nervous. It was of course Mme de Freysac who made the allusion she had been half expecting and a few compliments were the result, received by Blanche with her usual composure. As they moved in to dinner Oriana stated her preference for *The Marriage of Dora*—no other book of her friend’s had pleased

her so well. As she caught Blanche's eye the girl paused and Mme de Freysac took the opportunity to say in her most insinuating tone :—

"What a gift yours is, Mademoiselle ! To have written books that are enjoyed all over the world—I can imagine no greater happiness. Do you receive a large number of letters about them ?"

"A good many, yes, Madame."

"And do you answer them ?" put in Aymon.

"My companion does."

"No doubt she is doing so now—does she send them on to you ?" pursued the young man.

"A few—they don't vary much."

"Tell them about the one from the Australian sheep-farmer," said Oriana, glancing proudly down the table ; Blanche shook her head with a laugh.

"Which one do most people like best?" Mme de Freysac enquired.

"*Only a Governess*, of course," said Oriana in her arrogant, proprietary tone before Blanche could answer. "It has sold—"

"I don't think that is particularly interesting," said Blanche with a pleading glance at her hostess, who at once replied :—

"Indeed it is, Mademoiselle, to those immediately concerned—of whom you are not one, my child—" turning to Oriana.

"But it was in all the newspapers !" the girl exclaimed.

There was a general laugh, and Mme de Freysac said that her partiality was not for the book just mentioned. "I like my love-stories to end sadly," she declared.

There was a pause. Then Oriana fell into the trap before anyone could stop her.

"None of them do !" she said sharply. "I've read all Blanche's books—O !—except—" she stopped, her face reddening.

With marked smoothness Mme de Freysac diverted the topic to the host ; but already Blanche had ceased to listen, recognising as she received it, Zoë de Freysac's declaration of war. It was as if she had said, "You see what I can do—another time I shall not let you off so lightly." For a moment, as the familiar questions slipped out in that cool, gentle voice, the Englishwoman had imagined herself back in her own circle. The use of Oriana as a

screen was ingenious too ; it was unlikely that the girl herself would detect the procedure.

Neither fear nor dislike had as yet fully informed Blanche's attitude towards Mme de Freysac. That the Roncesvaulx circle revolved round her was not yet obvious to a newcomer, who had no idea how tyrannically dull and stiff it could be. Blanche was aware of her influence as of a faint perfume, sweetening Oriana's inconstancy, Aymon's malice, and his father's limitations. Only Mme de Roncesvaulx set a conversational standard ; she was theologically instructed in three languages, and her chief interest lay in the discussions of schisms, martyrology and religious history in general. She had just finished re-reading the *Apologia pro Vita Sua* and had a good deal to say about it. Blanche, who possessed a copy that she had barely skimmed through, confessed her ignorance at once ; tactfully Mme de Freysac steered the Duchesse back to the Early Fathers ; then, perceiving the gentlemen's blank features, she embarked on an anecdote which imperceptibly linked the clerical with the lay interest. Then the conversation turned to miracle plays and so to the theatre in general. Oriana had never been to the play—how should she begin ? Everybody had something to say—Mme de Freysac alone offered no opinion while she listened to those of the others.

So the first hours of the visit slid away, and Blanche was beginning to feel at ease once more, when the faintest, lightest reference slipped out to the inadequacy of her chaperonage of Oriana, so discreetly put as to cause her no more than a twinge ; it was a premonition of a challenge in which her pupil's loyalty was the prize, of that she had no doubt at all. She had no chance to reply as the talk flowed into other channels.

When coffee had been served and the garden inspected, the Duchesse de Roncesvaulx announced that they were all to be Mme de Freysac's guests until it was time to return home. They walked through a wooded enclosure and up a slight incline to the farm-house, a low, E-shaped building with cream-coloured walls and reddish-brown tiles.

Here they were then, in the siren's cave. Blanche's opinion of her judgement revived a little at her first impression of luxury and softness which was caused by the rich, involute colouring of the low wide room, running all the length of the middle section.

The walls were painted a pale shiny lilac and covered with frescoes of birds and flowers ; there was an angular formality about the treatment of the design that Mme de Freysac explained as the work of a Chinese art-student who had decorated the room in return for lessons in French and German. The window curtains were of Russian needlework, copies of some in the Peterhof palace ; their acid, Byzantine greens and yellows lit up the colours of the wall-paintings with a glassy radiance. The walls and the hangings contained the only touch of the bizarre : the rest of the room conformed rather to the eighteenth than the nineteenth century. There were a pair of ebony cabinets, filled with white rococo figures in Capo di Monte, many bowls of roses and carnations, worn Persian carpets, and bookshelves of polished birch ; three or four low tables were littered with books and periodicals in French, English, and German. An embroidery-frame leant against one of the cushioned window-seats ; near a small upright piano, draped with a fringed Paisley shawl, was a porcelain stand on which perched a macaw, his raw blue and yellow piercing the delicacy of the room as harshly as his outcries at the entrance of the party.

As soon as the guests were seated and the two older ladies had got out their needlework, Mme de Freysac rang the bell and little cakes, hot chocolate and fruit were brought in by an elderly peasant woman ; but Mme de Freysac served them herself.

Blanche was ready to own that not to be surrounded by clumsy and ill-trained footmen, snatched from the lobster-pots or the plough, as at Yssimbault and Marécourt, was a relief. Later on she discovered that Mme de Freysac lived unchaperoned, with only three servants ; she could cook and garden and make her own dresses if she had to. In exactly what circumstances she had learnt this independence, Blanche was never to know. There were many stories about her early days, Oriana had said, each one more unlikely than the last.

The talk became easier and gayer than at Marécourt ; but suddenly something so unusual happened that again Blanche felt herself once more in the circle created for her by the Marchants and their friends. The conversation turned—through the unseen manœuvring of the hostess—to current affairs and thus to the invasion of Denmark by the Prussians. It was the first time since her arrival in France that any matter of European import had been

raised, and Blanche perceived that her companions were (with the exception of Oriana) both knowledgeable and detached in their attitude towards this catastrophe ; they did not all agree, and Mme de Freysac unobtrusively conducted the argument, hinting, qualifying, and then all at once showing herself as an authority. This became so obvious that Aymon taxed her mockingly with influence in political quarters—or had she found Paris full of handsome exiled Danish officers on her last visit there ? The lady replied with a laughing denial ; but her rising colour showed that she was not always so discreet or impregnable as she appeared at first ; and very soon she took occasion to change the subject, her poise now completely resumed.

Finally, in the space of half a minute's conversation between the Duc de Roncesvaulx and his mistress, Blanche was able to see which of these two led the other. He had started—obviously not for the first time—on one of his shooting stories. Whether his hostess considered it unsuitable or merely boring, she could not tell ; but with a single phrase, uttered in a quick low tone of icy displeasure, Mme de Freysac dammed the old gentleman at the source, as it were, and he was silent. The remark was made with precision and speed and then covered up in a flow of talk, so that only Blanche, who was a little outside the circle, was aware of what had happened.

Meanwhile throughout the afternoon Oriana had made the greatest efforts to behave in a civilised manner, and with moderate success. It was plain that Mme de Roncesvaulx was pleasantly surprised ; Blanche saw her look approvingly at Oriana more than once. But the pleasure of seeing her pupil take her place as a social figure was shadowed then, and all through the night that followed, as Blanche lay awake in recollection. Zoë de Freysac was dangerous and powerful—how then to deal with her ?

At last, as the sunlight began to creep round the curtains, Blanche reached a conclusion. Oriana must be married at once. Whatever plans Mme de Freysac had were based on the assumption of several months' delay. As Blanche turned over and fell into an exhausted doze she did not for a moment doubt that she would be able to carry out her purpose of hurrying on the marriage.

CHAPTER 13 *Blanche and Aymon*

IT was not the work of a moment to persuade M Desmarests to hasten his daughter's wedding. Such marriages did not take place as casually as in England, he declared ; the lawyers had hardly started their negotiations : the Roncesvaulx would object to this change of plan—and finally, what could be gained by installing Oriana at the Villa before the time arranged ? He did not add, What business is it of yours ?—because it did not occur to him to do so ; neither did Blanche imagine for an instant that her decision would in the long run be questioned. She pointed out that it was in her employer's power to insist on Mme de Freysac's absenting herself ; he frowned and changed the subject. Then Blanche returned to the charge ; she said that the young couple had planned to spend the first months of their married life in Paris ; when they returned to Marécourt, if they did find Mme de Freysac in residence it would be with a difference.

"What difference ?" said M. Desmarests sharply.

"In a month there should be a change in your daughter's relationship with her husband," Blanche firmly replied.

"Do you guarantee it ?" he asked with a sour smile, and she answered in the same manner :—

"Oriana's character is an affectionate one—if M. de Marécourt treats her as she should be treated—"

"Are you going to arrange that also ?"

"I had thought of speaking to Mme de Roncesvaulx—with your permission—of Oriana's—difficulties."

M. Desmarests looked faintly amused. "You have not answered my first question," he said after a pause. "What do we gain by this procedure ? Why should not the marriage take place in six months' time, as arranged ?"

"You told me that Mme de Freysac had turned her attentions towards M. de Marécourt. What effect may they not have had in six months ?"

"Do you really know what you are talking about, Mademoiselle ? And what reasons am I to give for this caprice ?"

"Surely your affairs—"

He brightened. "I could go—in fact I should prefer to go—to Russia before Christmas. That would be reason enough for the old people." He seemed to sink into deliberation. Then he looked up, thrusting his head forward, his small bright eyes on Blanche's face. "What else have you to suggest?"

"During our visit to Marécourt Mme de Roncesvaulx happened to mention that before Oriana's marriage took place she would like her to visit the old Princesse de Roncesvaulx and the cousins in Provence. If they could go south with her now—"

"Send them out of the way together? Very ingenious. She will wake up one morning to find the birds flown—eh? Yes—it might be done. Would you go too?"

"If I am needed, certainly."

"I think you will be. You had better tell the child to-morrow. By that time I shall have seen the old people."

The process of telling Oriana was a stormy one. Married—*married* in two months? Her trousseau was hardly begun—her jewels not even contemplated. The most highly developed maidenliness could not have produced a greater shrinking than the young lady's care for her preparations. Reflecting that money could do most things, Blanche suggested a telegraphic message to M Worth.

The bustle of the ensuing weeks, the interviews, the eruptions of local society, the visits of Worth and his minions made the days race on. The great dressmaker promised Mlle Desmarests that her dresses would be waiting for her at the Hôtel de Marécourt; and once she was similarly assured by the jewellers and furriers, Oriana ceased to complain, acquiescing to the innumerable calls of inspection from all the branches of the Marécourt family with a lazy indifference.

Blanche's conversation with the Duchesse de Roncesvaulx did not take place until a few days before the departure for Provence. In the older woman's eyes Blanche was not and could never be more than an adjunct to an important negotiation; Mme de Roncesvaulx considered Blanche's plea for an improved attitude on the part of her son towards Oriana with as much care as she gave to the notaries and rather less courtesy than she accorded to her confessor. She made the inevitable comment on the sentimentality and vagueness of the English about marriage in general; in return Blanche pointed out that Oriana's lack of early training had given her little awareness

of and much less respect for tradition in these matters ; she went as far as to hint at Mme de Freysac's participation, but this departure was received with frigidity. Finally the old lady said that his confessor would represent to her son some part of his marriage as in the nature of a task ; he had seen Oriana and had remarked on the deplorable frivolity of her temperament—though she must add, said Mme de Roncesvaulx, with a stately bend, that Miss Peverence had greatly tamed her. A few months ago Oriana had been little more than a savage ; they all, Aymon himself, hoped that Mademoiselle would continue her jurisdiction over his betrothed.

It was not long before Blanche became aware that the inclusion of Aymon in this speech was a polite euphemism. The young man was prepared to look on Blanche's establishment in his household as a convenience ; he made it very clear that she was to be the duenna and no more. He was seen to fidget on more than one occasion at Blanche's chaperonage, customary though it was. She on her side had no notion of the uneasiness she caused him by her frequent and thoughtful scrutiny, nor did she realise that M. de Marécourt had no use for women of intellect of his own or any other race—with one exception.

The events of these days made it difficult for Blanche to insist on the hours of solitude that she had come to look on as essential for her mental tranquillity. One morning, a month after her suggestion to M. Desmarests had been accepted and a week before the journey to Arles, it was borne in upon her that her journal had not been touched for nearly ten days ; also she must convey a refusal to Alfred Marchant, who had suggested visiting her on his way to Paris. Oriana was spending the morning in bed, having announced that she would neither receive visitors nor be approached by the dressmakers for one day at least : and when Blanche had done her writing she decided to walk round the terraces before rejoining her pupil.

She mended her pen and began to write—after all, she could walk when she had read Oriana to sleep. When she had written a few lines she shut the book and went over to the window. It was a still, misty day, very like that on which she had woken up at Yssimbault nearly four months ago. Suddenly it occurred to her that she was wasting her time. It was not necessary to continue these elaborate and methodical descriptions. She would write no

more than the bare outline henceforward, so as to leave herself free to meditate and plan for Oriana. She was not engaged on a book after all—and yet she felt as she always did when beginning a new novel. She locked the diary and went out. She went as far as the conservatory and stopped at last in the orchid-house, recalling that first struggle with Oriana—the struggle that had seemed to end in defeat. She sat down ; then, after an interval of supplication and abasement, she reviewed all that she had done and tried to do for her pupil.

It was enough that the precipitation of the marriage had caused Mme de Freysac considerable annoyance. Of the gossip Oriana heard she had repeated a sufficient if garbled quantity to make it clear that a spoke had been put in Zoë's wheel. It was certainly a relief, though Blanche disliked hearing it from such a source, to know that his mistress had had a "scene" with the Duc de Roncesvaulx, though of what nature it was difficult to ascertain ; now the news was that she had left for Paris and was going to stay there until the wedding was over.

During her recapitulation of these facts it never occurred to Blanche to congratulate herself on the perspicacity that had indirectly caused Mme de Freysac's departure, any more than it would have occurred to her to consider remarkable her manipulation of the personages in her novels ; and although she had disappeared as neatly as the bad fairy in a nursery tale Blanche did not believe that the happy ending had arrived—she hoped to hold Oriana's first child in her arms before that was accomplished.

Meanwhile no one had troubled to tell her that the improvement in Oriana was quite extraordinary. The Roncesvaulx aunts and uncles, rocking from side to side in their old-fashioned, shabby coaches, exclaimed on the girl's beauty and asked how it was that her reputation had been so appalling ; she was a little awkward and rather foolishly dressed, too silent and too talkative by turns, but certainly not the wild beast that dear Alix had represented. No, no !—a little more training, and the child, though rough and simple, would do well.

Only Blanche knew how ceaseless, subtle and varied had been her efforts in this direction ; Oriana's vanity, her affection and dependence on herself had been played on until she expected to find them worn through. But every day the girl seemed to find it

easier to model herself on Blanche's heroines ; nothing made her happier than to impress some ancient Tante Séraphine or Cousine Frédégonde with her unexpected good manners. As long as Blanche was there also to discuss them with her and even laugh at them a little afterwards, she was the more willing to show herself off the next time.

Blanche had to admit that only twice had she seen Oriana and her fiancé amiably disposed towards one another—and then at the farm-house ; it was hateful to conceive of that woman's having anything to do with their good-humour. What was to be done with Aymon ? As she repeated the question he entered the conservatory.

He greeted her with his usual coldness. When he heard that Oriana was not available Blanche was surprised to see him linger. She made some comment on the wedding preparations and he replied that it was an excessively tedious affair ; this was the first time they had ever found themselves alone, and without an audience Aymon's manner became easier. He sank into a chair beside her and peevishly gazed at the tips of his toes before making some further complaint to which she sympathetically replied, and so their talk continued for some time, Aymon becoming more expansive and Blanche less aware of what their relationship had promised to be. At last he broke out :—

“If only my mother would leave me alone !” He seemed to recollect himself and resumed the more nonchalant tone habitual to him in company. “My parents seem to exist in a sort of vacuum. They know nothing of the world, of course—but it’s absurd that they should lecture those who do.”

“I think older people often do forget the difference between the generations,” Blanche replied.

“Yes, don’t they ? It’s amazing.”

“But Mme la Duchesse is so clever—I cannot believe that—”

“You don’t know Mamma in her preaching vein ?”

“There is this to be said, that she has had a long experience of married life.”

“That’s what she continues to tell me,” said Aymon with a fretful laugh. “Don’t make it a chorus, pray.”

“I could hardly do that,” said Blanche with a smile, “as I am single myself.”

"Really, I sometimes think you're to be envied," declared Aymon, yawning.

"You must not say that to me, M de Marécourt. It makes me sad that you should think it, even."

Aymon looked pleased. "I'm brutally frank where these questions are concerned," he admitted. "You must forgive me."

"O ! I do," said Blanche, who had now come to a decision. "But you must allow me to be truthful also. May I say that I think Mlle Desmarests is better suited to a husband who has seen as much of the world as you have, than to an ordinary country squire ? I am thinking of her first, you see."

Aymon smiled. "I shall not be sorry to settle down," he said after a pause. "You may be sure that I don't intend to spend all my time in Paris—but it's no good telling her that just now, of course."

"Better not, certainly," Blanche agreed.

There was not time for her to begin on the suggestions that she had been meditating, for the Comte de Marécourt was outlining his plans. He intended first of all to set the property on its feet again, while pacifying Oriana with increasingly rare visits to Paris ; still he seemed unwilling to go, though for the moment he had nothing more to say ; when he had, it was to throw out hints of an unhappy and difficult family life. Blanche, disregarding the most obvious and pressing need of the Roncesvaulx, a need that she herself had been spared for many years, assumed immediately that he was speaking of his father's mistress. Aymon thereupon referred in an oblique manner to his success with the sex : and here again Blanche's reply indicated that she thought he was Mme de Freysac's lover, as M. Desmarests believed.

For a moment Aymon looked very much taken aback ; he recovered, however, and, with a deprecating self-satisfaction, confirmed Blanche's surmise.

It did not dawn on Blanche then, or at any other time, that since his earliest years Aymon's jealousy of his father was rooted in his own self-esteem. All his life he had seemed to see that crude virility taking toll of a being he admired, as only a young man can admire an older, more cultured and sophisticated woman. Sometimes he suspected that beneath her friendliness Zoë de Freysac despised him. That one individual—especially one whom

he was beginning to look up to in spite of himself—should assume the existence of a relationship that his pride rather than his lust had always demanded gave him courage to believe that he could do what was expected of him.

Aymon de Marécourt left Miss Peverence in the highest spirits ; he hummed a tune in his light tenor, and ran down from the Castle more cheerfully than for many years. As he got into the launch he began to make his plans. Meanwhile Blanche, well satisfied with her morning's work—for it was essential that Oriana's husband should like her—went in to find her charge.

The few who noticed thought it very natural that the Comte de Marécourt should wish to converse from time to time with his fiancée's chaperone. Very much later on Oriana told her that Aymon had said, "As a foreigner she's out of things here—it's a kindness to put her at her ease—and of course—" the unfinished phrase implying that modesty forbade the stressing of Miss Peverence's good fortune.

So during the course of that week, the first of Mme de Freysac's absence, Miss Peverence and M. de Marécourt discussed many things ; at the end of each conversation Blanche guiltily reminded herself that his future treatment of Oriana had not been so much as hinted at by her in spite of all her opportunities ; somehow listening to him talk about himself was so much more absorbing.

Their discourse did not range widely—but it did touch on Mme de Freysac's long-established defiance of M. Desmarests' wish that she should leave the neighbourhood. This gave Aymon a chance to deplore his future father-in-law's rustic morality. "Curious old peasant that he is," he would say, "if my mother receives her—she is of good family on the father's side—why not M. Desmarests. I should like to know? Naturally Mamma would not compromise the family if Mme de Freysac were a person of no breeding or education—but one can't expect him to grasp the essentials of anything outside finance and pottery." He paused and then added :—

"As to the other—Zoë knows something of his early days in Paris that he would give a great deal to forget. You have noticed that he never speaks of his time there and will have nothing to do with the place?"

"I have."

"I've no notion of what he did. But the fact remains that he

arrived there penniless and then amassed a good sum of money in a shorter time than—" Aymon hesitated and then finished complacently, "than I believe is usual even with the most remarkable of such people. She knows something about it, and—"

"But Mme de Freysac must have been a girl in her teens at the time?"

"Yes. It's singular. Her mother, perhaps—she was a person of very low origin."

"And you don't know what happened?" Blanche exclaimed.

Aymon winced at the implied criticism. "Of course not," he replied sharply. "Her power lies in telling no one. That bit of knowledge, whatever it may be, has saved us all one or two bad quarters of an hour at his hands. Not that I criticise him—" he added, "he's pleasant enough for a man of that class."

Blanche made a sound of protest at the last phrase and disregarding it, he continued,—"As I was saying to Mlle Lydie Riquet-Toustain, whom I found with my mother just now, a man of breeding should be able to converse with persons in any walk of life—but she's like all the other old ladies round here—you can imagine her attitude."

The next day, leaving Oriana engaged with her preparations for Provence, Blanche went alone to the mainland with the intention of walking on the sands. The day was still and soft; the trees had cast away their autumnal colours. It would have been possible to have waded back to Yssimbault, for the tide was far out.

As she stepped on to the shore Blanche looked back and saw the Castle towering above its exposed base whose crevices were festooned with gleaming ribbons of seaweed. A pale sun appeared and turned the shallow waters beneath to an icy aquamarine in which the lights were of silvery gold; tiny fringed waves crept up and stretched along the sand.

The beach was almost deserted, and Blanche set off, thankful that her packing was nearly done—for she had refused to trust it to other hands than her own—and Oriana safely superintending her maids. She promised herself a walk of at least two hours.

She had gone about a mile, stooping down now and then for the sea-shells that Oriana still continued to collect, when the wind suddenly puffed at her hat and pulled her scarf out behind her; she looked up and felt a drop of rain on her cheek.

This was annoying. She had packed most of her clothes and was now wearing a new dress of silk poplin that would be irretrievably damaged if the rain spotted it. She looked round and saw herself a long way from shelter. The low overhanging bank that bordered the sands was better than nothing, however, and draping her scarf over her dress, she walked quickly towards it ; now the rain began to fall more heavily. She had reached the bank and was about to climb to the shelter of the trees, when a voice called softly :—

“*Mademoiselle ! Mlle Peverence !*”

Blanche looked up and saw Zoë de Freysac standing above her. She was wearing a long cloak of mole-skin, a neat black satin bonnet and mouse-coloured gloves and boots of soft leather. As Blanche gazed at her, much at a loss, she went on :—

“You have no umbrella and neither have I. But my carriage is here. Let me drive you home—or at least to my house until the weather clears.”

Blanche hesitated ; but the older woman’s manner was so curiously insistent, her glance so eager, that the murmured phrase was left unfinished. As if aware that she was saying too much, Mme de Freysac dropped her eyes, and then raising them with her look of mockery and sadness said gently :—

“Do you really want to spoil that beautiful dress ? Please, Mademoiselle—let me help you up the bank.”

It would have been ungracious and childish to demur. Blanche looked round again, and seeing no opening, grasped a handful of coarse grass and attempted the ascent.

“Don’t try to get up that way,” said the low, caressing voice above her, still with the suspicion of a laugh in it. “Here—give me your hands.”

Hardly aware of what she was about, Blanche obeyed. The thin delicate wrists that supported hers were of a flexible, sinewy hardness and strength. At last, feeling even more foolish than she looked, Blanche dusted her dress and began to thank her companion, who interrupted her with :—

“It is nothing. See—we must run to the carriage. Put my cloak over your gown—I have only an old dress on—” as Blanche began to protest—“*Mademoiselle, I insist.*”

Blanche was cloaked and borne along ; by this time her hat was

on one side and she was red in the face. Mme de Freysac seemed to glide over the rough track—it was hardly more than a bridle-path—and so they came to a light covered landau of modern design, drawn by a pair of grey ponies at whose heads a boy in livery was standing. Mme de Freysac put her hand on Blanche's arm and said :—

"There—how fortunate that we should have chosen this road on my first day back—I have an invalid cousin with me whom I must introduce to you."

It was, of course, characteristic of Mme de Freysac that she should be doing one kind action while embarrassing Blanche with the graceful performance of another ; and there were soup and flannel under the seat, no doubt, in case they passed any cottages, thought Blanche, bitterly recalling her original picture of the Duc de Roncesvaulx' mistress.

The carriage door was now open. A lengthy, languid, hollow-cheeked young man with a white face and sunken grey-blue eyes was sitting in it. As he half rose Mme de Freysac motioned him back with one of her deliberate gestures.

"My cousin—Captain Charles Daalgard—my dear Charles, can you make room for Mlle Peverence ? She has been caught in the rain."

"Certainly—" said the young man in a gentle, severe voice and an unsmiling inclination of the head ; then, raising himself by his hands, he shifted slowly towards the corner of the carriage. Blanche made a movement to help him, but with a hasty "No, thank you—" and a furtive look under his long dark lashes he pulled the cushions into position and sank gingerly back upon them.

She now perceived Captain Daalgard to be older than her first glance had led her to believe. He was perhaps thirty-five, perhaps more—it was difficult to say, for his high forehead was crossed with lines, whether of suffering or of the beginnings of middle-age it was hard to tell, and his olive-pale skin as leaden as that of a much older man ; his long bony hands with their square finger-tips were those of a youth ; his hair, closely cut for the present fashion, was a silky greenish-brown, greying a little at the temples.

He looked out of the window as Mme de Freysac took the reins and the boy tucked the rugs round him ; as the breeze blew the rain into the carriage he shivered, though the day was not a cold

one. Blanche saw then that his profile was sharply and clearly moulded ; his lips were set in lines of depression, his cheeks drawn into faint creases, the marks of characteristics that she was not yet able to define or even to guess at ; all she could see was a young man who would have been handsome to the point of effeminacy if he had not been cadaverous and big-boned. He had a remote, icy expression ; he seemed too ill or too shy or too indifferent to mind his manners. She resolved not to disturb this austere repose, and so they drove on in silence to the farm-house, where Captain Daalgaard began to get out of the landau, refusing any help from either of the ladies. He finally revealed himself as a little more than six foot tall ; he was gaunt and shabby. There was no resemblance between him and his cousin, except in a certain cold Nordic severity of colouring, and a hint of asceticism, more pronounced in his look than in hers.

As he paused the page sprang forward with a stick, and leaning on that and on his cousin's arm, he followed Blanche into the living-room.

Zoë de Freysac rang the bell and pulled off her gloves. Still Captain Daalgaard did not speak ; he stood in the middle of the room gloomily contemplating the macaw, while the bird swung itself forward and uttered scream after scream.

CHAPTER 14 *A New Acquaintance*

MME DE FREYSAC'S sitting-room had an open fire-place in which some driftwood was burning ; as the salted flames with their green and blue edges darted up the chimney the smell of hot chocolate and newly baked cakes brought Blanche back to wariness and reserve ; she was unwilling to accept more hospitality than she need ; but as she looked up to see the brown face and white coif of the maid above a tray of Indian lacquer—how much pleasanter than at Yssimbault, was her instant thought, followed by an involuntary comparison of its intricate splendours with her hostess' genius for an informal yet luxurious domesticity. Everything that surrounded her was inevitable and fitting, from the faded

gilt of the *chocolatière* to the japanned papier-mâché handscreen that Mme de Freysac gave Blanche to shield her face, while she occupied herself with installing her cousin on a sofa at the other side of the hearth ; he sank back with a look of relief. She said gently :—

“Was the jolting too much for you ? It has started the pain again, I fear ?”

“No, no—” said the young man, in his tone of subdued austerity. “But I like it better here than out of doors, naturally.” He leant back and shut his eyes.

There was silence while Mme de Freysac poured out the chocolate ; still as they sipped and stirred no one broke it ; Blanche began to feel the stealing scented warmth as part of a congenial intimacy in which she was privileged to share. Zoë de Freysac’s crucibles were in everyday use ; she could conjure with firelight and a hot drink as easily as with sunshine and country wine out of doors.

As she broke up a twist of feathery sugared pastry and gave it to the macaw with a murmured word, the absence of effort, of forced talk, made them a friendly, familiar company ; so that when Captain Daalgaard opened his eyes and began to speak it was as if Blanche had known what he was going to say.

“I wonder what that creature thinks about all day long.”

Zoë made the slightest movement of her shoulders and smiled a little ; he went on, gazing from beneath his eyelashes at the bird :—

“Perhaps he imagines himself back in his tropical jungle when he looks at the walls of this room.”

“Perhaps—a jungle where everything has gone to sleep, as in the fairy-tales—” rejoined Zoë de Freysac in her tone of muted satire. Captain Daalgaard considered a little.

“It is more likely that he is thinking of his next meal,” he said absently, still watching the bird, whose malign unwinking gaze never left his mistress’s fingers. “Did he cost you a great deal of money ?”

“O ! no—he was given to me, many years ago.”

“And you keep him chained up ?” the young man went on with a faint smile.

“All savage creatures are better so—” replied the lady, letting her glance fall gaily on her cousin’s outstretched figure.

There was a pause in which Captain Daalgaard spread out his fingers on the fringed Paisley shawl she had put over his knees and looked at them passively.

"Is there not a refinement of cruelty in your methods? You surround your guests with every thought and care, and put that creature to scream in the midst of them—and you give him the illusion of freedom in a chinoiserie mirage."

"My dear Charles, how poetical you are. Polisson was bred in captivity—he would pine and die if he were unchained."

"So should we all—" replied her cousin, with an odd, sardonic, schoolboyish mimicry of the fashionable drawing-room gallantry that made both ladies laugh and look at him, Blanche to see if perhaps he was a little more serious than his tone implied.

"Do you consider that you and he are fellow captives?" Mme de Freysac enquired.

Her cousin shook his head with a wintry smile; all this time he had not once looked or directed his voice at Blanche; but she did not find the neglect embarrassing.

"You see, Mademoiselle," went on Mme de Freysac, as if aware of the gap between them, "what I get for rescuing my cousin from the Hôtel Dieu for convalescence by the sea-air—were you not ordered sea-air, Charles?"

"I was indeed—and a great many other things besides—" replied the young man, allowing the fraction of his glance to fall on the visitor, "and you have provided them all. Good food—absence from worry—" he smiled rather bitterly—"and—what else? Ah! yes—distraction. I'm constantly distracted, as you hear—" as the macaw began to scream and to bob up and down.

"He's a very fine specimen—" put in Blanche rather timidly. "Do they live to a great age?"

"I believe so, Mademoiselle—it's possible that he will outlive us all."

"Odd, to think of him swaying and gobbling there in forty years' time," put in her cousin.

"O—forty? Twenty is enough for me."

"And ten for me."

"And you, Mademoiselle?"

"I don't know, Madame. I find it difficult to imagine my life coming to an end."

"Ah ! that is because you are a writer. You think of yourself in terms of your stories which will surely outlive you," declared the lady. "Have you read any of Mademoiselle's romances, Charles?"

"Yes, I have," replied Captain Daalgaard, suddenly fixing his narrowed eyes on Blanche. "There were several at the hospital—not of very recent date. The one I liked was written some eight years ago—*The Coronet and the Sword.*"

"O ! I'm glad you liked that one," Blanche exclaimed. "So few people do—at least, I like it—but—"

"Surely it has sold a great many copies ?" put in Mme de Freysac in her most insinuating tone.

"Well—yes—but not to the usual public—it was not considered desirable—I daresay Captain Daalgaard remembers—" Blanche replied, rather unsure of her ground.

"Yes—the heroine leaves her rich elderly husband, and after a suitable interval marries a young soldier," said Captain Daalgaard gravely.

"And the husband ? What does he do ?"

"O ! I had to kill him," said Blanche, laughing nervously. "It is not all as improbable as it sounds, though."

"I must read it—have you a copy here, Mademoiselle ? No ? Then I shall write to Galignani," said Mme de Freysac, taking a tiny mother-o'-pearl note-book from her reticule. "*The Coronet and the Sword*—why have I never heard of this book ?"

"My publishers did not greatly like it," Blanche replied. "It was not suitable for young girls, and—"

"Nor even for young married women," finished Captain Daalgaard as she paused.

"No, certainly not," replied Blanche, smiling.

"Another cup of chocolate, Charles ?"

"No, thank you—don't we dine in an hour ?"

"Yes—and Mademoiselle with us—please—" said the hostess with a quick glance at Blanche's cup, which was still half full.

"I must be getting back, Madame—Mlle Desmarests will be expecting me."

"If I were to send a message ?"

Blanche still refused, and Mme de Freysac turned from her guest to her cousin.

"You see how it is, Charles—no one does anything I want. You refuse your soups and gruels—"

"Gruel—" murmured the young man, his eyes again on his wasted hands.

"Have you been long ill?" Blanche enquired.

"Not very."

"My cousin is not a chronic invalid," said Mme de Freysac, as she saw his look darken. "He was badly wounded some months ago, and—"

"Wounded!" exclaimed Blanche, before she could stop herself, "In a—" Just in time she recollects the etiquette and turned the question into a sympathetic murmur.

Captain Daalgaard seemed amused. "I'm no duellist, I fear," he said coolly. "I got caught by a—shell—" he drew a long breath—"running away from the Prussians."

"The—"

"We had to fight them, as one does from time to time, and we were not very successful."

"You are bewildering Mademoiselle," put in Mme de Freysac, her glance, now rather anxious, on his increasingly severe expression. "I should have told you that my cousin is a Dane on his father's side, and that he was wounded and left for dead for many hours in the battle of Als. A French Red Cross ambulance took him to Paris—and I brought him here."

"Yes—I was lucky—" said the young man in an indefinable tone.

Blanche was silent for a moment. "How terrible to be invaded—and then to be ill and—and alone—" she murmured.

"O ! people get used to it, I believe—it's perhaps a good thing to be uprooted—" said Captain Daalgaard in a vague, almost inaudible voice; all at once he looked quite bored and exhausted and shut his eyes as if he were never going to open them again.

"Your chocolate, Mademoiselle—" said Mme de Freysac in a low voice, with a significant look at her cousin.

Blanche forced her thoughts away and gazed at the refilled cup. She did not really care for chocolate at this hour, and was wondering how she could refuse without appearing ungracious, when quick light footsteps were heard. Aymon de Marécourt then entered the room in a dashing style that made both women stare and Captain

Daalgaard open his heavy eyes. He strode up to Zoë de Freysac and kissed her hand.

"Why did you not tell us that you were coming home? I have but this moment heard, and—"

"I hardly knew myself, until I started. My cousin—"

As the introduction was made the Comte de Marécourt's face fell; then, quick to perceive that the newcomer was ill, shabby and a foreigner, he had only to glance at Blanche to resume all his poise.

He looked round the room and finally took up his position in front of the fire-place with his hands under his coat-tails, rattling off his enquiries, as if, thought Blanche, the place belonged to him. He appeared to be in the highest spirits and was soon able to ignore Captain Daalgaard, who after a long, gloomily mirthful glance sank into silence while Aymon rallied Mme de Freysac upon her secretiveness.

"Of course you do it to torment us—" he declared. "Come now—admit that you had every intention of coming back almost at once."

"Indeed I had not," she replied, a little taken aback at this tone of assured compliment. "But I found my cousin in need of a change, and so brought him here. I have not decided whether to keep him company during the whole of his convalescence, which promises to be a long one."

"Ah! really now, upon my honour, your caprices are incalculable," pursued Aymon. "How often have I heard you say the kind of thing, and then not act upon it? Miss Peverence will join with me in persuading you to stay."

"I thought you were both leaving for Provence?"

"Good heavens—Provence in the winter! It's unthinkable! Do people actually go there?" demanded Aymon, fingering his whiskers.

He continued in this vein for some time, unaware of Captain Daalgaard's ironic attention and fully enjoying the effect he made, that of reducing his hostess to acquiescent silence. She looked at him as women do when they suspect a man has been drinking and seemed unable to make up her mind; then some particularly high-flown compliment struck her as ludicrous, and she began to laugh. This delighted Aymon; he stood warming himself and glancing from Blanche to Zoë with his most coxcombical air.

Captain Daalgaard seemed sufficiently entertained to remain where he was, till the growing familiarity of Aymon's approach to his cousin caused him to raise himself from the sofa with a murmured excuse.

"You're leaving us?" Aymon exclaimed. "I see you're as badly treated as I am—persuade your cousin to stay, Madame, won't you?"

By this time Captain Daalgaard had got himself off the sofa and Aymon's face fell again as he saw that the newcomer was an inch or two taller than himself. Charles Daalgaard caught the look and said gravely:—

"I have to have what is called my rest now. As you see, my whole day is spent on the sofa—but it seems to be a question of changing one's position now and again."

"Indeed—indeed—" replied Aymon with a vague and joyous cordiality, "I'm sorry to see you an invalid—the Marécourt air is a famous cure, you know—you'll soon be quite yourself here—if you can put up with the tedium."

"O! it's not so tedious—" replied the other, moving slowly towards the door. "If you will excuse me, Zoë—"

"Can I help you? The stairs—"

"No—no, thank you—"

"But I insist!" exclaimed Aymon, darting forward with a flourish. "If neither of these hard-hearted creatures will give you an arm—"

Captain Daalgaard turned with one of his slow painful movements. His expression was quite altered: a faint flush rose to his cheeks and the corners of his mouth twitched a little as he looked down at Aymon's proffered arm, neatly encased in bright blue English cloth. For a moment he seemed unable to answer; then Blanche's alarm disappeared as she saw that he was suppressing a laugh. His amusement was infectious; Mme de Freysac turned quickly to the mantelpiece. Aymon remained for a moment with his arm out, not in the least nonplussed.

"No, I am obliged to you," said Daalgaard at last with his slight grave inclination of the head, "I am just—er—regaining my strength—you are most kind—" and he limped out of the room.

"A very nice fellow—" pronounced Aymon, returning to the mantelpiece. "One of your Russian connections?"

"He is half Russian, half Danish," replied Mme de Freysac, and

she repeated what she had already told Blanche, adding that her cousin not only had temporarily lost his health but had been forced to abandon his property in Schleswig and was therefore penniless.

"Too bad—did they confiscate everything?"

"The new régime consider him a dangerous influence—he was warned not to return."

"Too bad indeed—and he was a man of some position, I suppose?"

"No—my cousin farmed his own land—it was quite a small place."

"Is he going to settle here?" enquired Aymon, now apparently in two minds as to what his attitude should be.

"He doesn't care for the idea. We are difficult to uproot—we northerners—" said Mme de Freysac with her melancholy archness. "But I was hoping, that as he knows a good deal about cattle and the breeding of stock, I could find him something to do here."

"He's the very man I need for the property. I'll think it over and see what can be done."

"You are exceedingly kind."

"Not at all. One's sorry for those unfortunate Danes—they had no chance. Is he really knowledgeable?"

"I should think he was—but I know nothing of farming."

"True. It would be a thousand pities if you did—women should not occupy themselves with these things," said Aymon with a beaming glance, "but with the—ah—beauty that surrounds them." He surveyed the room that he must have been familiar with for the last fifteen years as if for the first time and with an almost pathetic appreciation. "Upon my word, it's good to see you back. One feels at home here—don't you think so?" turning to Blanche, who murmured something complimentary.

Mme de Freysac had seated herself in a low chair and was looking at Aymon with a puzzled expression. There was a pause in which Blanche began to wonder how best she could excuse herself: a glance at the window had shown her that it was still raining. Mme de Freysac's eyes followed hers, and she said hastily:—

"You cannot go until it clears."

"I should think not!" from Aymon. "What's this? Chocolate? Excellent—" and he took up Blanche's cup, which was still full, from the table.

"Don't drink that—it's cold—" said Mme de Freysac sharply.
"I'll ring for some more."

"I won't hear of it—" said Aymon gallantly, raising the cup to his lips with one hand and feeling his whiskers with the other.
"Your chocolate is always—"

"Put it down ! It's cold !"

Surprised by this shrill violence, Blanche looked round to see, as if in one movement, Aymon about to drink and Mme de Freysac swiftly going towards him. She did not wait to take the cup away. She dashed it from his astounded face and stood in front of him, still panting a little. The cup was in pieces on the floor and Aymon's waistcoat and her dress were spattered with dark drops. There was a short silence.

"You see—" said Mme de Freysac in a low trembling voice, "how—how nervous you make me—" and she knelt down and began to pick up the pieces.

Aymon looked at his waistcoat ; his mouth fell open : his expression hovered between excitement and annoyance. For a moment he was speechless.

"Have I offended you ?" he said at last in a blank voice.

Mme de Freysac got up, the fragments of china in her hand. Her lips were pressed together and her eyes seemed to have sunk into her head. Then she spoke in her usual limpid and caressing tones ; she appeared to be making an unsuccessful effort to smile.

"Not deeply," she said, "not—irreparably. I must apologise to you both. I have a horror of lukewarm chocolate—it would have pained me to see you drink it—you see how foolish I am—" As she spoke she was looking at the floor ; she picked up another fragment before Aymon could reach it and began to wrap the pieces in her handkerchief. As soon as this was done she turned with a serene and smiling face to Blanche, murmuring a further apology.

At the breaking of the cup and during the scene that followed Blanche's feeling had been one of bewildered embarrassment. It did not take her very long to get over that. Now, with a blind, instinctive wish to hide herself, she had drawn as far away as possible from what she had seen. She would never know what that second cup had contained. But the first ? Was she to die here, or later on ? But no—again she could acclaim the power she considered never to have failed her. Thereupon she knew that whatever else happened

she must get away. She became aware that Aymon was regaining his nonchalant manner and that the hostess, the murderer, was ordering a carriage. She said steadily :—

“I feel faint. I have been sitting too near the fire, I think. Could you—could you take me back to Yssimbault, M. de Marécourt?”

Aymon readily agreed. He seemed as much set up by Blanche’s company as by Zoë’s, to whom he promised to return as soon as he had escorted Miss Peverence to the ferry.

“Not this afternoon—come to-morrow—” said Zoë de Freysac quickly.

“And why not to-day? More caprice? Am I to—”

“More caprice, if you like, yes,” replied Mme de Freysac, smiling. “Come to-morrow, to dinner. I would like you to see some more of my cousin.”

“I don’t come here entirely to see your cousin, you know.”

“Please go now. Mademoiselle is waiting.”

Aymon shook his head at both ladies; he was once more enjoying himself immensely. “Well, well. I give in.” And he gave Blanche his arm.

She was in need of it. Her knees were beginning to tremble; a reply to Mme de Freysac’s smooth curtsey was impossible. But she got out of the room somehow and so to the ferry, Aymon chattering beside her. At the foot of the Castle she dismissed him, saying that she would be better alone and in the fresh air.

As a measure of calm returned she began to see that there was nothing immediate to fear. The first cup had, of course, been poured out while she was looking at it; Aymon had saved her from the second. Now she shudderingly perceived the reason for Zoë de Freysac’s eagerness to bring her to the farm-house, her insistence as she plied her with the second draught.

It was not yet possible to take in all the implications nor the whole motive, which she did not believe to be one of simple revenge. Later that afternoon, when indignation and disgust had got the better of fear, she wrote to Alfred Marchant. Could he come and see her immediately? She had changed her plans; the expedition to Arles must start without her. She added that she would ask permission for him to stay at Yssimbault for a couple of nights—they must meet, and as soon as possible.

CHAPTER 15 *Duty and Pleasure*

"I DO not quite understand," said Alfred Marchant, in the level tone that may conceal extreme annoyance, "what your object was in sending for me."

"I was anxious to have your advice."

The publisher laughed shortly. "When people ask my advice I conclude it is because they have already made up their minds. But in this case—it is different."

"Different?"

"I don't advise. Blanche, I implore, I beg of you, and so would Cordelia, if she knew all that you had told me, to return to England. You have done a great deal for this girl already. Your task is over. For my sake, for the sake of your reputation, come back with me."

"That is impossible," Blanche replied firmly.

"In Heaven's name, why?"

"Dear Alfred, we have already been through this many times. It is my duty to stay. My father would have upheld this decision."

Alfred Marchant inwardly cursed the Reverend William and all his works ; for a moment he said nothing ; he looked round at the primrose marble walls of Blanche's sitting-room, got up to inspect one of the engravings and returned to his chair. Then he said formally :—

"This is a charming room. The view must be delightful in fine weather."

"If only I might persuade you to see my situation as I do," said Blanche in a pleading tone.

Mr Marchant's expression softened ; he crossed his legs, rubbed his fingers through his thin curly hair and gazed at the stove as if considering the conversation of the last two hours all over again. Then he said in a reasonable tone :—

"Well, let us take it point by point. I think you will admit that you have already done a great deal for this girl?"

"I hope I have."

"My dear Blanche, don't I know your methods? Gentle, firm, invulnerable—you don't influence, you pervade. Your first letters are very clear in my mind—I remember your description of Mlle Desmarests as a perfect little savage."

"I was wrong, Alfred. There was a great deal in her that I did not comprehend. I believe that she was all along as I now see her—her good qualities were hidden."

"Well, here she is, philanthropical, well-mannered (comparatively so) and you are responsible."

"She is of a very affectionate disposition."

"No one would have thought so from your first account of her."

Blanche made no reply : the publisher's plump features seemed to sharpen as another idea came to him.

"By the way—I have been too much occupied with what we have been discussing to ask about your work. Are you contemplating another novel?"

"No—I don't think so," replied Blanche in a tone of mild surprise.

"And your journal? If you have filled it with a detailed account of your life here, had you not better give it to me to take care of? It may be a very interesting document one of these days."

"You are always so kind and thoughtful, dear Alfred. My journal, though I keep it locked, contains nothing that is of value. I have no time to write down all that I have told you. It is merely a day to day account—not even that—of the life here. There is no time just now to enlarge on the personal and intimate side."

There was a pause.

"You have no *time*?" Alfred Marchant repeated in a low voice.
"Can you possibly know what you are saying?"

"What do you mean, Alfred?"

The man of business gave Blanche a long peculiar look ; he got up and took a turn or two about the room. Then he advanced towards the low chair in which she was sitting and standing over her, said very deliberately :—

"Do you recollect your way of life before you came to this place?"

"Yes indeed, I often think of it."

Alfred Marchant paused ; then he said in the same carefully inexpressive manner :—"You got up, as I recall it, at seven. You breakfasted at eight and walked for an hour. Then—you worked till dinner-time. You walked or read or saw your friends during the afternoon. Then you worked again till supper. On certain days you dealt with your very considerable correspondence."

"I have been thinking that I should not have asked you to take that off my hands. Would you prefer—"

"Wait a moment. That was your life. Now—how do you fill in your days? I am not speaking as your publisher, to whom your career means a great deal, but as your friend."

"You know how grateful I am for everything you do for me."

"Never mind that. What I want to know is this—*how are you spending your time?* Have you ceased to write?"

"Temporarily—"

"No, Blanche, it won't do. You are throwing away everything for a chit of a girl who will forget you as soon as she has her first child—or her first lover. I am speaking to you, not as a woman, but as I should to a younger brother. Your behaviour warrants it. You have plunged yourself into the life here—you have already changed the course of its events—"

He stopped abruptly. A look of slow, astonished realisation came over his face, hardening it still further; his was no longer the expression of the kind, worried, commonplace friend, but of the acute, far-seeing man of affairs. He sat down suddenly and said as if to himself :—

"Unless it is—that you *are* writing—but not with paper and ink."

"I don't understand—"

"Listen, Blanche. All your life—ever since your seventeenth year—you have controlled and directed a steady stream of industry—creative industry. What has happened to it? Tell me."

"It has dried up, I suppose," said Blanche, looking distressed.

Alfred Marchant paused again. Then he leant forward, his hands on his knees, his eyes on Blanche's. He said emphatically :—

"I don't think it has. I don't think it has dried up at all."

"Perhaps later on—"

"I see you are quite unaware of what you are about. But I have a notion—shall I try to make it clear?"

"Please do."

"Well—here you are—an influence—that, you will admit, cut off, through no fault of your own, from the pursuit that has hitherto filled all your days, all your energies. You come amongst these people, and in a few months, what happens? *They* begin to change, not *you*."

"Alfred!"

"Not all of them of course, but the young and the weak, this girl and her future husband. Do you see what I mean?"

"Not—not very well."

"The girl, for instance. She was a nonsensical, harum-scarum little goose, at the best—quite unpresentable, even as to her clothes."

"Yes—but—"

"Wait. Don't you see? You are turning her into one of your own heroines. She is charitable—ladylike (almost!) civilised—"

"I'm afraid not quite—" Blanche interrupted, smiling in spite of herself. "She—"

"Never mind. She will be—she will be. Yes—I can see it now. Do you? No, of course not. You are *using* these people—they are turning into characters in a new book—that is why you have no time, as you call it, for writing."

"Alfred, what do you mean?"

"Think over what I have been saying."

"But I have altered nothing—this marriage, for instance—"

"The marriage was the basis on which you began your new plot. But you tell me that Mlle Desmarest's attitude towards it has changed."

"I merely represented to her—"

"I know, that was all you did. But would you not acknowledge that she will be a very different kind of wife from the one this young man originally had to face?"

"Surely it is all to the good—"

"I don't care a fig for these people's good. It is you, your safety and your career, that I think of. Of course your journal is neglected—of course you are not engaged on a new novel. You are already occupied in *making*, not influencing merely, the drama of Yssimbault and Marécourt. This young man, for instance."

"Which one?"

"The Comte de Marécourt—upon my word, I forgot the other, the Danish fellow. His part has not been allocated yet, but—"

"Alfred, I really think you are talking great nonsense. I don't deny influencing Oriana—for her good, I truly believe. But M. de Marécourt—"

"My dear Blanche, perhaps you are going to tell me that he has not made a confidante of you, as everyone does, sooner or later?"

"N—no,—" said Blanche in a doubtful tone.

"Very well, then. You represented him as so trivial, so unsure of himself, as to be the merest cypher in this—this circle of yours. You talk to him, become his friend, all with the highest motives, naturally. What happens? Overnight, in a manner of speaking, he has turned into a dashing young blade, a sort of carpet cavalier, who is no longer afraid of making love to a woman who in her turn thinks nothing of doing a little murder over a cup of chocolate between dinner and supper."

"Alfred! You go too far! M. de Marécourt made it absolutely clear to me—horrible though it is to admit, or even to talk of such things—that Mme de Freysac was his mistress, long before I visited her."

"I wonder."

"You are absurd, and what is more, very unjust."

"My dear Blanche, my suspicion is that he did *not* make clear the very unsavoury situation you describe. You did. Your belief—"

"O! of course, if you are going to twist everything I say—"

"I don't mean to do that. The last thing I wish is to offend you. But I have known you for some fifteen years, and I know your powers."

There was a long silence.

"I know you are trying to help me," said Blanche at last in a trembling voice. "But this is fantastic—if I had not known *you* for fifteen years, I should say it was gross and evil-minded."

"Blanche, I am absolutely, deeply serious when I say that you are making these people into the protagonists of a new romance. Without planning events, as you do when you are writing a book—or are you perhaps planning them?—you are causing them—unconsciously."

"What have I caused?" Blanche exclaimed.

"Characters alter circumstances, do they not? Furthermore, to turn to another personage in your new world, this wretched and evil woman has brought her cousin here as a means of making either the old or the new flame jealous. She also sees you influencing the young couple against her, the young couple she would have settled on—as you told me yourself—as she had on the old, if it had not been for you. Why has this—cousin—never appeared until now?"

"Surely, coincidence—"

"My dear friend, you, as an accomplished writer of fiction, have often expressed to me your disapproval of the use of coincidence."

"That has nothing to do—"

"Well, let us leave the Danish captain out of it, then. But here is the scene, here are the characters. There is enough material for the new romance—and if you will not admit that you have provided some of it, you are at least using it. Here is an inadequate young husband, an unprincipled mistress, a beautiful girl, a tyrannical father—all the characters in a Peverence novel."

"They were here before I came."

"Not the cousin, nor the others in the guise in which they now appear. This marriage, to take the most immediate question, would have been a marriage like others on the continent—now—"

"I wish I could think it were going to be different. Neither cares for the other—there is not the minimum of affection."

"Perhaps not—but there is a great deal more to a marriage than affection, let me tell you."

"How does that apply here?"

"Your heroine's standards have altered—"

"I do wish you would not call her—"

"She will expect more from her husband than she would have if she had never met you. And he—"

"Well?"

"You force me to say what is distasteful to us both. He *has* altered—how it will turn out we can't as yet tell. There still remains this horrible woman. She is as dangerous as such creatures usually are—her potentialities were there, and I think even you will admit that she has, because of you, attempted to use them."

"Yes, but—"

"Again, if the Comte de Marécourt had been the totally enfeebled individual you first knew—you see, your descriptions are so meticulous that it is easy to picture him—would he not have put down the cup of chocolate at once? He was determined to assert himself—and that action of his, inspired by you, saved your life."

"How could I have inspired it?"

"My dear Blanche, you confessed yourself bewildered by the change in him. It does not bewilder me. Don't I know what you can put into the people you meet? You listened to him maundering

and drivelling about his conquests until he began to believe in them himself."

"That—that may have been so."

"Well ! I am glad to hear you admit something."

There was a short pause.

"But Alfred—to write a story with real people—it's not possible."

"If it were not—let me sec, what o'clock is it ?—you would be engaged in the correction of your morning's work on your sixteenth novel."

Alfred Marchant leaned back ; his look of triumph faded as he watched his companion's face.

"You see—" he said more gently, "It *is* a romance—your best, perhaps—but leave it alone. You are changing these people as surely as if they were in a fairy-tale and you a sort of female Merlin."

Blanche smiled. "I take my subjects from life, I always have. If the characters are behaving unnaturally, it is no romance of mine."

"Dearest Blanche, I don't need to emphasise my admiration of your work—but you do *not* take your situations or your characters from anything but your own fertile and active brain."

"But everything you say sounds so improbable, and—and foolish."

"I was afraid I should not convince you."

"How could one individual, a foreigner, and a dependent—"

"Pooh ! Don't talk about dependents to me. You are a rich woman."

"But even if this far-fetched hypothesis of yours were tenable—which I don't for a moment admit—"

"Of course not. Go on."

"I have done no harm here. I even venture to think I may have done some good, with God's help."

"My very dear friend, paper and ink are not your materials. You are using—I must insist on this point—flesh and blood—incalculable humanity. It is an experiment, and an interesting one. But already you have faced death in a very horrible form. In fact I hardly think that Cordelia—"

"Don't tell her. Not yet. Not till—later."

"Perhaps it would be wiser. But see what has happened—an

attempt on a valuable life, a life dear to us and to all your friends. Turn your back on it and come home—or go on to Italy, if you don't want to be in England."

Blanche's manner changed. She drew herself up and said with rigid composure :—

"You seem to forget that I am responsible—although you yourself have said so—for the well-being of a young creature who has entrusted herself to me. I cannot leave her."

"She has done without you for seventeen years."

"Alfred—my experience at the hands of Zoë de Freysac is only a further proof that my place is here. As long as she knows that I am watching her there is less danger for Oriana."

"And your own danger? The anxiety of your friends?"

"Dear Alfred, I am a great nuisance to make such a piece of work about all this. But I must stay. It is my duty."

"Good God!" broke out the publisher, throwing up his hands. "A few months ago you had never heard of this girl! And now for a whim—"

Blanche said in a low voice :—"Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye also even unto them."

"I appreciate that. But suppose you only make matters worse by staying?"

"I shall ask for the Help that has never failed me."

"And human help and advice you despise?"

"No, no, indeed I do not. I am very much distressed by your anxiety. It makes me feel dreadfully wicked—"

When she had blown her nose and was able to speak again, Blanche said softly :—"Please—please don't be angry with me."

"Of course I am not angry—I am deeply concerned, as you would be, if the positions were reversed."

A long silence ensued. Then Blanche said in a calm and gentle tone :—"I wish you could have seen Oriana. I think you would feel then as I do, that she has a right to—to happiness."

"And you put that first? The happiness of one individual?"

"I have always considered—as my father did—that happiness is the true goodness."

Alfred Marchant drew a long breath. "No doubt," he said coolly, feeling that one more excerpt from the Reverend William's dicta would cause a total breach of manners, "But what do you

anticipate? Is she so completely under your control that you can guard her from the excesses of her own temperament, for instance?"

"I cannot be certain of anything," said Blanche with an assured, uplifted look. "I can only do my best—and it is here."

"The truth is," broke out Alfred Marchant irritably, "that you *want* to stay on. You have set the machinery in motion and now you want to see what the result will be."

Blanche compressed her lips. The publisher got up and put his hand on her shoulder.

"Forgive me, my dear. But will you at least promise me to take every possible precaution?"

"Indeed I will, dear Alfred. You are so very, very good to me."

Alfred Marchant began to speak, cleared his throat and broke off. "Your arrogance is terrifying—and magnificent—" he said at last with a faint smile.

"It is very pleasant to have you abuse me again," said Blanche, returning his glance. "I think you will always understand."

"Don't be too sure about that. Now—as to practical matters. You are going to warn Mlle Desmarests of her danger?"

"I shall have to. We are so frequently—entertained—at the farm-house."

"And the father?"

"I think—perhaps not. He might retaliate in some desperate way—and I have no proof that she attempted to kill me."

"So you are taking the whole responsibility from his shoulders?"

"He might insist on her being taxed with it—then I should simply appear an hysterical donkey, and be forced to leave."

"I still think you will be taking too much upon yourself."

"It seems to me necessary that I should do so. I am not sure—I shall have to consider it more deeply. Again, if I tell him he may well choose not to believe in me, and then my prestige is gone. After all, I cannot even prove to myself that she tried to kill me. Sometimes I think I must have imagined such a horrible thing." She looked up rather wildly.

"I wish you had, dear Blanche, indeed."

Blanche gazed for a moment at her trembling hands and then took up her netting. After a few minutes' work she said briskly:—"I do not think there is any real cause for alarm. This failure of

Mme de Freysac's gave her plans away. She knows now that I shall be on my guard."

"Let us hope so."

"It is in any case useless to dwell on that aspect of the situation, and we will not do so," said Blanche, in a tone that her father's circle would have recognised immediately. "The question is, whether I am right in staying here. You think I am doing it out of curiosity, and for what I believe some writers call copy."

"It doesn't signify—if you have made up your mind."

Blanche said rather timidly :—"There is one thing of which I must assure you. I don't altogether understand your notion, as you call it, about my attitude—but I have no intention of using all or any of the incidents I have witnessed here in a novel."

"My dear Blanche, that was *not* my opinion. You are writing your novel *now*—your characters are developing, your situations—but need I go on? I ask you, do people behave as these have, outside the page of a novel? Here is a commonplace marriage of convenience turning into a melodrama, and through you."

"Is that a criticism of my methods as a novelist?" asked Blanche with a laugh.

"Very well—thank Heaven you can take it lightly. But I assure you that I am speaking with the utmost seriousness of which I am capable when I ask you again, and for the last time, to leave this place and come home to those who need you and love you."

"Dear Alfred, I cannot. Please forgive me."

So their talk ended. The next morning they said good-bye. Blanche was perfectly cheerful and calm and Alfred Marchant did his best to follow her example.

Blanche received one scrawled letter from Oriana, full of reproaches and complaints at her desertion. Then there was silence. She was alone at Yssimbault all day and every evening. Jean Desmarests was in Alsace. Meanwhile the wedding preparations continued, some of them under her jurisdiction.

The fortnight of Oriana's absence passed slowly. Blanche was able very soon to dismiss Alfred Marchant's analysis of her attitude as a super-subtlety with which she had nothing to do ; she had always secretly believed that Cordelia overrated his perspicacity and judgement, and here was the proof. Then she considered the days of creative work that their conversation had recalled and realised

that she did not regret them ; when she could achieve happiness for Oriana it would be time enough to think of starting her books again.

A natural caution kept her away from Marécourt, though she would have liked to wander in the forest as the days grew stormy and the wind lashed the spray against the Castle walls. Jean Desmarests returned a few days before his daughter, and he and Blanche spent a good deal of time together ; his mechanical suavity diminished each time they parted, to be renewed as soon as they met again. He showed her over one of the factories beyond the woods of Marécourt ; this was her only expedition to the mainland.

On a wild wet evening at the beginning of December, Oriana returned. She burst into Blanche's room, kissed her vehemently and before the older woman had time to ask her whether she were tired, what she wanted for supper or how she had progressed in Provence, had begun a violent harangue.

"O I'm so angry—I could kill that horrible old woman !"

Blanche's thoughts returned at once to Zoë de Freysac and her enquiry was non-committal. Oriana continued :—

"What does *she* know about my dresses ? Horrid—"

"What are you talking about, my dear child ?"

"My wedding-dress, of course—O ! I can't tell you how—but wait—you saw the designs ?"

Further questioning elicited the interference of the Duchesse de Roncesvaulx ; accustomed by now to taking as it were a hair-pin bend in the adjustment of her responses to Oriana, Blanche was reminded by her that the wedding-dress, of silver lace, sewn with brilliants, was to have been constructed over the fashionable small crinoline in the "Louis XVI" style, with panniers and trimmings of silver bullion. Mme de Roncesvaulx, during her final inspection of the drawing that they had taken with them to Arles, had pronounced it to be unsuitable and exaggerated and, without consulting Oriana, had written to the great dressmaker to insist on the huge outlines of a crinoline which dated, so the bride tearfully declared, from 1861. The resultant scenes had of course been extremely shocking. Oriana had countermanded the old lady's orders—Mme de Roncesvaulx had written again—and so on. It was time now, Oriana announced, for Blanche to put her foot down : otherwise she intended to appear at the altar—her costume for the civil

marriage not having been censured—in her nightgown. “That old—”

“Stay, Oriana. At what stage is M. Worth? The dress is due here the day after to-morrow.”

“That’s what I don’t *know!*” between a sob and a howl—“O! I do hate—”

“You have the small crinoline frames here, have you not?”

“Of course—several. I haven’t *ever* worn one of those huge, horrible, old-fashioned—”

“Then if the dress arrives on the larger one, it can be taken in here, and the panniers adjusted, can they not?”

“O! Blanche, I do love you! And we won’t say a word—”

“I shall speak to Mme la Duchesse,” interposed Blanche in her firmest tone, “On one condition.”

“*Anything!*—”

“That you apologise to her for your rudeness. You are in the right over the crinoline, so you can afford to.”

Oriana consented without demur. The rest of that evening and the whole of the next day were fully occupied, to the exclusion of any topic unconnected with the wedding. When at last Blanche was able to give a studiedly detached account of Mme de Freysac’s attempt on her life, it was received in a characteristic manner.

“Good gracious! What a horror! But isn’t it like in one of your books, Blanche darling? O! won’t Aymon be angry when I tell him, that’s all!”

“Oriana, this must not be mentioned—I am not going to speak of it, even to your father. I had to tell you, because—”

“Because she might try to poison me?” Oriana swirled round from her scrutiny of Blanche’s face, and looked at herself in the mirror. Then she said:—

“We shall soon be off to Paris—she can’t do anything to us there. Were you dreadfully frightened?”

“For a little while.”

“I should have killed her if anything had happened to you,” said Oriana, speaking rather as if her griffon had been in question.

“And what good would that have done?” Blanche tartly enquired.

“O! I don’t know—I should like to hurt her—I can’t endure those silky ways. And then—Aymon is always talking about her.”

"What does he say?"

"O ! how cultured she is—well, I daresay, she's got nothing else to do but read and play the piano, living in that old farm-house—and what a lot she could teach me—"

"Really !" Blanche exclaimed.

"I told him," pursued Oriana, languidly resuming her contemplation of herself in the glass, "that she ought not even to be mentioned—women like that are very wicked, aren't they ? Mlle Marie Riquet-Toustain agrees with you about that."

"Does she indeed ?"

"Now don't laugh at me. O ! well it doesn't matter—about Mme de Freysac, I mean. She's quite old—and she's so thin, she'll soon die, I should think—" and Oriana glanced down at her swaying curves with conscious satisfaction.

And now at last the marriage day, like a great gleaming bubble, borne on waves of perfume, incense and rich food, swelled nearer and nearer, its spinning iridescence centred in the triumphant beauty of Oriana in her glittering dress, a coronet of emeralds and diamonds in her hair, a bouquet of white and green orchids in her hand. There was wine, there was music, there were disagreements and discussions in which the words "precedent" and "procession" resounded above all else. Ancient aunts trembled and nodded like plumed hearses, piping village children presented nosegays and recited verses, the heads of the Desmarests factories tugged perpetually at their gloves and gazed through the groups of provincial relations ; Philippe de Caumont and Baudoin de Marécourt got drunk, Jean Desmarests lost his temper histrionically and appallingly, Oriana's sables were lost and found at last in one of the kitchens, a Marécourt niece who was expecting a baby swooned at regular intervals, the servants wept and quarrelled and slaved, the Riquet-Toustain sisters appeared constantly in tears and Blanche became rigid with fatigue. She seemed to be at the bottom of a steep and dazzling ascent with the altar at the top—and the journey was laborious and crowded, littered with favours, jewels, bouquets and coloured heaps of expensive rubbish. Long afterwards she could only remember Oriana bursting into tears and clinging to her father, who looked much put out, the pattern of a thousand hot-house flowers rocketing to the roof of the chapel, Aymon classic and bland

—and somewhere, a diminishing point in the background, Charles Daalgaard's ravaged and melancholy features. "My new agent—" she heard Aymon say, as he smilingly presented him to his wife. And last of all she saw Captain Daalgaard between torchflares and candlelight, leaning against a pillar in the ball-room, head and shoulders above a group of elderly local employees. Oriana, fluttered and restless, jewels winking, foot tapping, dark clustered curls loose on her neck, caught Blanche's hand between her hot fingers.

"Don't you think he's handsome?"

"Who?"

"That man—the new agent—don't you?"

"Yes—I suppose I do—" Blanche replied.

PART II LACHESIS

*Vous portez des fleurs, la belle;
Comment vous appelez-vous ?
Les vents et les vœux sont fous,
Un baiser les fit époux
Je suis l'amante, dit-elle.
Cueillez la blanche de houx.*

VICTOR HUGO.

CHAPTER I *The Villa*

IN the year 1722 Hippolyte-Etienne-Marie de Roncesvaulx quarrelled with his friend and patron, Philippe d'Orléans, and left Versailles, never to return. He was ruined and disgraced, said some; it was a temporary retirement according to others; a few declared that the Regent had with his own hands thrust him from the presence of the young King, that Roncesvaulx had challenged his life-long friend and, gravely wounded, had been secretly conveyed to his estates in Provence; they had fought over a dancing-girl, an English courtesan, a gambling debt, a set of verses. The Duc d'Orléans denied nothing: and very soon the brilliant favourite was forgotten.

Hippolyte de Roncesvaulx was at this time thirty years old. He returned, unwounded and enigmatic, to his estates on the coast; he married a cousin of his mother's, thus retrieving his financial position and began to build the Villa des Oiseaux, where he installed his mistress, the cause of his downfall; she was one of a troupe of jugglers and tumblers, a negress some fifteen years old, whom he had won from Philippe d'Orléans at cards. That was quite usual: but even the Regent's laxity had not extended to the creature's appearance, in a Court dress blazing with diamonds, at a military review. There was a scene, but no duel; Hippolyte de Roncesvaulx left Versailles in a rage, his Philaminte, as he called her, in the coach at his side; a year later when he was safely married and the Villa ready, he sent for her from Provence.

Hippolyte de Roncesvaulx was a child of his age; detesting tradition and formality, he made a cult of the outdoor and the naturalistic. The Villa des Oiseaux was a square, symmetrical

building of pale red brick : eight pillars of pink marble divided the façade ; the interior was constructed round a central elliptical hall, carried up through all the floors and expanding on the first to a larger ellipse with a gallery round it that gave access to the bedrooms and was covered by an eight-sided glass "lantern" dome. The decoration of the principal rooms embodied all that the taste of the day could achieve in the curvilinear and the grotesque ; the plasticity of the ornamentation appeared to have passed through a semi-fluid state and was swept up, as though by a whirlwind ; entablatures, pier-glasses, and balustrades surged backwards and forwards like the crests of a wave. The colour-schemes were subordinated to an extreme and tender delicacy ; citron, eau-de-nil, shell-pink and palest turquoise were the favoured backgrounds for the painted birds and monkeys and *amorini*, encircled by swirling, gilded arabesques, irregular and involute, according to the fashionable emulation of nature, then considered to disdain straight lines or equal curves.

There were few pictures ; these were thought too heavy and insistent for the elaborately swelling and tapering patterns and vistas that had, however, no element of chance, being the calculated result of conscious skill ; the balance and the grouping were there, though one must peer through a rococo jungle to observe them.

The Duc de Roncevaux saw his dark mistress as the ultimate expression of modish savagery, and for a time to watch her fitting about her fantastic palace was sufficient compensation for the wearisome dependence of court intrigue. Whether she would have delighted him for more than a year is problematic ; at the end of that time the bird of paradise had drooped and died, and the Villa was abandoned.

In 1780 his grandson opened it again for another favourite, a young Italian castrato, who declared himself unable to produce his best notes surrounded by soulless birds and monkeys ; so François de Roncevaux obliterated the decorations of the upper rooms for solider, more conventional "compositions" in the style of Cauvet and Delafosse. Ten years later the singer fled to Milan, and the local Comité National made the Villa their headquarters, in their turn destroying some of the decorations, so that only the hall and the ground floor remained as originally seen. In '12 and '13 the Villa became General Reille's staff headquarters, and his clanking, high-

collared young officers removed the sprawling *Liberté*, *Egalité*, *Fraternité* that had recently disfigured the walls for oilpaintings after—rather a long way after—Horace Vernet and David. In 1848 the Villa became private property once more ; but Jean Desmarests, the new owner, did not trouble to redecorate it until the year of his daughter's marriage.

To the surprise of his subordinates, the great Emperor's admirer declared that the pseudo-David wall-paintings were worthless and had them effaced. By this time only the hall, the library and the ceilings remained as Hippolyte de Roncesvaulx had planned them ; the saloon was still decorated in the Louis XVI style and all the other rooms were either bare or defaced. When the new artists set to work they had a free hand ; their principal, Carlo Melli, a Florentine Jew and a designer on porcelain, approached his task as if it had been an order for a dinner-service.

The fashion sponsored by this decorator was that of the *trompe-l'œil* that had been used at intervals since the seventeenth century. His version of it was so peculiar and so vivid that Blanche Peverence when she first entered the principal rooms was for some moments under the impression that they had not been decorated at all. The drawing-room walls consisted of oblong panels, covered with porcelain tiles painted to resemble the cheapest kind of varnished wood ; only a very close scrutiny revealed the imitation. These panels were divided by columns of cracked, cobwebbed and ivy-wreathed marble, some of them on the point of falling forward—or so it seemed, until another glance revealed them as strips of hard-paste porcelain set flat in the wall ; here and there, between wood and marble, as it were, a pillar had been broken off to show a glimpse of stormy sky, clouds or a sunset, according to the range of the design. The deception was here, as elsewhere, carried very far ; on a dark day it would have been necessary to touch the porcelain to be sure of its existence.

This refinement of mimicry was carried out all over the house. Oriana's bedroom and dressing-room seemed to have been decorated with little sketches and "views" of medieval ruins, pinned carelessly to strips of pinewood and curled over, as if in a breeze ; this effect was also achieved by tiling, as was the trellis-work, covered with climbing orchids, of her boudoir. The bedroom china was composed of different vegetables : the bath was a huge golden marrow, the

basin a basket of asparagus, the pot de chambre a cabbage, and so on. The success of such a venture lay of course in the manner of its execution; Carlo Melli used that touch of the formal and symbolic in his treatment which made the result arresting and gay when it might have been overweighted and tedious. He had copied the designs of the original scheme in the hangings and covers, so that the whole interior correlated with the central hall.

Finally, though disagreeing over much, the Florentine and his employer had concurred in leaving such reminiscences of the Villa's former owners as seemed to them fitting and harmonious; so that in the saloon the portrait of Philaminte let in above the malachite mantelpiece still beckoned from its tropical bower and in the dining-room the swarthy pettishness of the Italian singer contemplated a Gothic wilderness of ruined abbeys, ravines and castles; and here and there the solidity of the Louis XVI compositions, the elegant exuberance of the preceding "return to nature" and a few ponderous Napoleonic emblems peeped out between the luxuriance of a newer inspiration.

In the bitter northern spring Blanche returned alone to the Villa. After three months of Parisian gaieties Oriana had seemed curiously submissive to her husband's decision of coming back to Marécourt, and Blanche was given a week to prepare for their arrival; at the end of it, she found herself pleasurable fatigued, on a March evening of the year 1865. The newly engaged servants, of whom old Jeanne from Yssimbault was the only one she knew, had worked well; everything was in order; and at six o'clock Blanche walked all the length of the terraces to remind the head gardener that the fountains must be started early the next morning. This was done: and she decided to take the air a little longer before going indoors.

Jean Desmarests had restored the gardens to the "naturalistic" richness of the early eighteenth century. The terraces were divided into elaborately curvilinear basins and surrounded with "wildernesses" and artificially ruined arbours, whose broken and crumbling statues he had replaced with figures in coloured faience from his own factories; the effect was startling and gay.

The principal summer-house, a temple of Apollo, of which only the shell remained, had been redecorated as a mock Gothic

chapel ; its four circular windows were canopied in dead white plaster and the chairs and table had been designed by Pugin.

Even on a dull day the baroque pink mansion with its glittering crystal dome and jewelled patchwork background of statues and water was luminous and fair ; now, in spite of a cloud or two, the pale orange of the marble terraces gleamed underneath the hydrangeas of pink and lilac and faint azure, rising stiffly from dark blue and white Italian pottery. There could be, thought Blanche, no more suitable setting for Oriana's languid and sumptuous beauty than the massed colours of this delicate toy pleasure-dome that seemed to have been waiting for her through a hundred years of spoliation and restoring. She must be happier here, happier than at Paris, was the Englishwoman's conclusion ; and her mind travelled back over those three months of marriage.

The M^{es} Riquet-Toustain had welcomed Blanche during these days of preparation and she had dined with them once or twice. Their social traditions precluded any comment on Oriana when in company ; but walking round the garden M^{lle} Marie had drawn Blanche aside to ask if the poor child had enjoyed her first taste of the world. As Blanche hesitated the old lady said brusquely :—“Aimée de Caumont tells me she was quite at a loss—I discount any reports from that quarter, naturally.”

Blanche was ready to admit her pupil's failure. How could an ignorant and (it must be owned) ill-bred young woman in her teens hope to compete with the sophisticated circle to which her wealth and her husband's title had brought her ? Her mistakes had not been endearing but ludicrous : her lack of dignity a disadvantage, her methods of conversation a bar to progress ; and finally, she had failed to please either of the Imperial rulers of her social destiny ; she had neither the ease nor the range that her competitors showed in relegating her to the outer ring of the world of fashion ; and the most singular aspect of the whole situation had been her indifference to it. In vain her husband had lectured, dragooned and at last ignored her ; Oriana shrugged her shoulders but remained impassive : plainly, her thoughts were elsewhere, in spite of her outward absorption in theatres, balls and the masculine admiration that she encouraged fitfully and with the same lack of enthusiasm ; this might simply mean that she was fretting—but for what ? Now and then it seemed to Blanche that she had lost

her young lady's confidence. It was as if she were waiting for something and Blanche knew that it was not maternity. That was unfortunate : but there was plenty of time.

Musing on a series of possibilities, puzzled, anxious, Blanche found herself at the last terrace. From the newly built stables she heard men's voices, the stamp and whinny of an impatient horse as the Comte de Marécourt's hunters fidgeted in their boxes. She turned away from these sounds and began to walk slowly through an avenue of cedars towards the temple of Apollo. She had to cross a bridge over a little stream. Then she stopped suddenly ; she was facing Mme de Freysac, who seemed to have sprung out of the ground.

For a moment the two women looked at one another ; then Blanche inclined her head and began to walk away. Zoë de Freysac spoke in her tone of mocking and gentle satire :—

“Will you not permit me to speak to you for a moment, Mademoiselle ? Is the sight of me so distasteful ?”

“You know that it must be,” said Blanche in a low voice, half turning ; try as she would to cut herself off, there was an appeal in the speaker's voice and manner that forced her to reply ; it was impossible not to feel an intense curiosity, however profound her disgust.

Mme de Freysac's expression was serious and humble. She wore a close-fitting gown of dead-leaf silk and a black bonnet and mantle ; she might have been a “finishing” governess, independent, distinguished, self-effacing. She continued smoothly :—

“Mademoiselle, I hope to persuade you that I am quite inoffensive—you have nothing to fear from me.” She smiled faintly and raised her fine eyebrows. Blanche replied :—

“I am not afraid of you, Madame. But we have nothing to say to one another.”

Mme de Freysac looked up and down the alley ; she clasped her hands and then dropped them, as if she had suddenly put aside the instinct to plead ; her glance dwelt on the Englishwoman in amusement and resignation. Then she said :—..

“I cannot hope to appeal to anything but your curiosity—have you none at all ?”

Blanche looked up quickly. The question had thrown her off her guard. She did not answer, and the other continued in her low plaintive voice :—

"I want to walk round the gardens. When you have seen me do that, you will be able to put me out of your thoughts for ever."

"I have done so already, I believe."

"O ! surely not, Mademoiselle—entirely ?"

There was a pause ; irritated by the hint of a laugh in the question Blanche said sharply :—"What are you trying to make me believe ?"

"Only that my bolt is shot—you know that as well as I do."

"Why have you come here ?"

Mme de Freysac did not answer for a moment. Then she said in a choked voice :—

"Because I wanted this place. I wanted it more than anything in the world."

Blanche stared—was this agitation a piece of acting ? Mme de Freysac was looking past her to the temple of Apollo ; she became very pale ; she fumbled for her handkerchief and pressed it to her lips ; her movements were clumsy and hurried.

"You see—" she said at last, with an attempt at a laugh, "I came here to say good-bye."

"Good-bye ?"

"To this place. I shall never have it now. I shall never come here."

"You are going away ?"

Mme de Freysac put out her hand as if she were going to fall ; she muttered :—"I meant—I don't know—could we sit down somewhere ?"

Between alarm and suspicion, Blanche struggled for a reply ; at last she said :—"You can sit in there—" pointing to the temple—"if you feel faint. I will send for one of the gardeners—"

"No—don't send for anyone," said Zoë de Freysac, moving forward, "I will sit here."

She walked past Blanche unsteadily and so reached the steps of the temple. Blanche followed her in and they both sat down. After a moment's silence Mme de Freysac said in her ordinary manner :—

"Why don't you stand outside, as you dislike me so much ?"

She looked so faded and miserable that it was impossible to associate her with the scene of violence that was already a highly coloured and distant point in Blanche's recollection ; she watched

with increasing interest, her fear of a fresh attack quite forgotten. Then Mme de Freysac looked up and spoke quickly.

"I do not think I need explain my situation to you." She seemed to collect herself, and then said in a more deliberate tone :—"You have beaten me, Mademoiselle. It was clever of you to hurry on the marriage." She paused and then continued as if speaking to herself :—"This place would have been mine—to restore as it should have been restored."

"The Villa is M. Desmaret's property," said Blanche coldly.

"He could not have prevented my—borrowing it, shall we say? You have made that impossible."

"I don't follow you."

"Don't you? Don't you know your own power? Do you need me to tell you what you have done?"

Blanche made a movement to rise; Zoë de Freysac lifted her hand.

"One moment, Mademoiselle. Before you came here, I was the family friend and adviser. I don't grudge you the position—it's a tedious one, as Aymon would say. But I should have had the Villa—was it not built for someone in my situation?"

"I really do not see—"

"Ah! Mademoiselle, you're too rigid. Why should you disapprove of me?"

"Because you are a wicked and dangerous woman!" Blanche exclaimed, goaded by the gentle, satirical tone. "How dare you—how can you speak—"

"And you are a disingenuous one. Do you ever think of the harm you are doing?"

"This is all great nonsense! I am not going to discuss—"

"You will not admit that, through you, my position has altered? I have no place now with the younger generation—your pupil regards me as her enemy, and her husband—" Mme de Freysac broke off and shook her head with a mournful smile. "What have you done to *him*? He's delighted with himself, of course—he came all the way from Paris to tell me so, a few days ago."

There was an echo of Alfred Marchant in the phrase that struck Blanche into speechlessness; she glared at Mme de Freysac, her large light eyes prominent and strained. The older woman contemplated her for a moment and then said plaintively :—

"It is all arranged, apparently—he intends to leave me where I am—she and I are not to meet—"

"You are not forced to stay!" interrupted Blanche in furious protest. "You speak as if—"

"No, but you see, I shall stay—if only to annoy you, Mademoiselle. Now if *you* were to go—but I don't expect you will—I might take your place here—anything might happen."

Blanche got up and Mme de Freysac did the same, remarking:—"You should have left well alone, believe me."

"Please let me go, Madame. I repeat, we can have nothing to say to one another."

Zoë de Freysac did not seem to be listening; after a short pause she said in an amiable, reasoning voice:—

"Has it never occurred to you that this house has been ruined? Only the outside, the shell remains. Do you know what it once was?"

"That has nothing to do with me," said Blanche, startled into a reply that she despised herself for making.

"Ah! but it has—do you think I should have desecrated those beautiful rooms with the monstrosities—but I really cannot speak of them."

"I have no jurisdiction over M. Desmarest's taste."

Blanche was still more surprised to find herself walking in silence with Mme de Freysac as far as the lowest terrace; they looked at the house for a moment before she spoke again.

"How can I make you understand that you have done nothing but harm in keeping me out of it? Did you not know that in many of the rooms the original wall paintings are still there, underneath the others? I assure you, Mademoiselle, such vandalism will not go unpunished—you will regret what you have done."

"You are talking of revenge?"

Mme de Freysac laughed softly. "Revenge! That's melodrama—we are not playing our parts in one of your romances—do you expect your young people to be happy here?"

"That will depend on themselves."

"You don't really believe that, do you? If you had not interfered, I should have been—well, lent—the Villa. Now Aymon thinks himself in love with me, and I have to be at his back door."

"Why did you not leave him alone?"

"He would never have thought of it if you had not put it into his head, I assure you."

"That is wicked nonsense!" burst out Blanche, stifling the echo once again. "You will never make me believe—"

"What? It was not him I wanted—I wanted this place. Now I must take what I can. And who is responsible? You."

"Please go, Madame. I ask you to leave me."

"Very well," said Zoë de Freysac quietly. "But I have this to say to you, Mlle Peverence. You think you have done something virtuous and useful in relegating me. It is nothing to you that in doing so you have handed over this house to a vulgarian who has desecrated it with disgusting horrors from his own potteries." She paused and then added, with slow, cool emphasis:—

"These are the things that matter to civilised people—houses, paintings, gardens. These will remain when the morality you stand for is either ludicrous or forgotten. Good-bye."

She gave one long look at the façade of the Villa, curtsied mechanically and turned away. A few moments later Blanche was indoors; she looked out of the window and saw the slight leaf-brown figure disappear round the bend of the furthest terrace.

CHAPTER 2 *Husband and Wife*

"WELL done, Mlle Cathos," said Aymon de Marécourt, raising his glass with his automatic gallantry. "You must be horribly fatigued. How you did it all in the time, I cannot conceive."

"There was no one to distract my attention," said Blanche, smiling.

"You hear, Madame?" said Aymon, turning to his wife, with a slightly satirical emphasis. Oriana's eyes were on her plate; she twisted her fingers in her napkin and said in a low voice:—

"Why do you call her by that stupid name?"

Aymon attempted to interchange a look with Miss Peverence; "You will have more time for reading Molière now," he said, adding,

"Upon my word, it's good to be home—" and he glanced up at the portrait of the Venetian singer over the mantelpiece. Perhaps the connection was not very happy ; he flushed a little and turned again to his wife. She raised her eyes defiantly as if he had been finding fault with her. Blanche said hastily :—

"I think we should read some Molière. He was considered rather coarse when I was a girl, but now—"

"A burnt out sort of wit—it is entirely of its own period, if you follow me," said Aymon condescendingly. "I like it, I confess—it's the spice that makes the dish, as any good cook will tell you."

Oriana yawned.

"Are you sleepy?" her husband demanded sharply.

"No—I don't think so. I slept most of the afternoon," she replied.

"Am I to conclude that we are boring you?" pursued Aymon, his smile a little more pinched than usual.

"O ! no—" said Oriana vaguely, unaware of the irritation in his tone. "Weren't you talking about spices? I was thinking we might have that rouennais veal that—"

"Oddly enough, we were discussing literature, not food. No doubt you can make some suggestion as to—"

"You know I know nothing about books," said Oriana, without resentment or confusion. "I thought you said spices—"

"Good heavens, let us avoid being tedious at all costs! I was speaking symbolically."

"O ! I see—" said Oriana, as if that put an end to the conversation.

Aymon compressed his lips, looked at his wife as if he were making up his mind to say something disagreeable, and shrugged his shoulders. Oriana took a peach from the plate in front of her and began to peel it. After the first mouthful she said thoughtfully :—

"These forted peaches are always tasteless. Have you had one, Blanche ?"

"I found them excellent," said Blanche, glancing at Aymon's exasperated face. "It is a treat to have a peach at all at this time of year."

"Another glass of wine with yours?" said Aymon, signing to the footman.

"No—I don't want any more," said Oriana, pushing her plate

away. "Let us go on to the terrace—I want some air—" and she got up abruptly.

As soon as they had reached the drawing-room Oriana, who had been remarkably silent ever since her return, rang for her furs ; Aymon arrived at the same moment and helped her into them rather as if she had been a child ;

"So we are to have coffee on the terrace—is that your command?"

This was the moment for an arch look, but Oriana did not make use of it for anything but a preoccupied frown as she fastened her sables. Her indifference was enough to shrivel up Aymon's sketch of an attentive young husband ; when they reached the terrace he began to pace up and down with a preoccupied air while the two women drank their coffee.

Aymon's expression now became one of increasing complacency. It was the first moment he had had to contemplate this part of his domain. During their time together in Paris it had become clear to Blanche that he was not now—had he in fact ever been?—a young man of dissipated or even very luxurious tastes ; he had one object in view, that of rehabilitating his property, a task which would take him many years.

Oriana now joined her husband, and leaning over the balustrade beside him, said shortly :—

"I want to talk to you about the swimming-bath."

Aymon turned ; his eyes ran up and down his wife's figure ; she was dressed in old rose brocade and her only ornament was a curious antique necklace of amethysts, garnets and roman pearls, set in blue and white enamel and gold filigree, that he himself had given her : Aymon's taste was unusual, as he was careful to point out. His eyes dropped at last, and so did hers ; it seemed extremely natural to Blanche that they should both look embarrassed.

"You are not contemplating bathing in March, surely?" said Aymon, with a return to his indulgent, rallying tone.

"No—but these things take so long—we should arrange about it at once."

"Have you made your decision as to the design?"

"O ! the Etruscan, of course," said Oriana, with the languid air that had increased since her marriage.

"Do you see her in an Etruscan setting?" said Aymon, turning to Blanche with a smile.

"I don't quite know what it means—something primitive and antique?"

"It should be Pompeian red," replied Oriana, "with black and grey marble figures—and some white—the bath itself perhaps white and grey. Did you not see the drawings? I'll get them—" and she moved away.

"While you and Mademoiselle study the drawings," said Aymon, "I must be elsewhere. I have to visit the stables—and then I have a rendezvous with Daalgaard."

"How careless of me!" Blanche exclaimed. "It slipped from my mind—but there was a message from Captain Daalgaard, asking you to excuse him. He has been in bed for a week, it appears."

Oriana was half-way to the french window; she turned and waited, her eyes on Blanche's face.

"Is he seriously ill?" Aymon asked.

"I think not. Someone called to say that—he has left—that he is no longer—"

"He is living in one of the cottages on the shore," said Aymon quickly. "Who called?"

"I don't know—I was out when the message came. But he hoped you would do him the kindness to visit him—I think he has written to you?"

"I haven't glanced at my letters," said Aymon airily. "That's the worst of being without a secretary—upon my word, I should have done better to offer Daalgaard the post. I hope he's not going to do this kind of thing too often. Let me see—I shall be busy all to-morrow—would you perhaps call and see how he goes on? Take him fruit or flowers—he'll appreciate some little attention of that kind."

"Certainly—if he is well enough to—"

"O! you could leave a message if he can't see you—it's a nuisance. I must be off in any case—Daalgaard's absence will give me more time for other matters."

With the last phrase Aymon threw a look at his wife; it was one in which uneasiness and triumph were strangely blended. She stared back and made the faintest movement of her shoulders. When he had gone Oriana and Blanche talked of indifferent matters; the older woman made some reference to the Comte de Marécourt's

correspondence with which she had been helping him during the last few weeks.

"Are you going to wait up for him?" enquired Oriana in a contemptuous tone.

"Wait up? It's not seven yet."

Oriana glanced at the clock; then her eyelids dropped and she said indifferently:—"I've no idea what hours Zoë de Freysac keeps."

There was a pause.

"Why do you assume that he has gone there?" said Blanche sharply.

"I assume nothing—I know he has."

Blanche got up and walked over to the balustrade. The sun was beginning to sink; as she looked out over the gardens, the fountains ceased playing, one by one. She heard a rustle behind her and Oriana's hand crept over hers. "*I don't care—why should you?*" she said softly.

Blanche's eyes filled with tears; she made no reply: there was indeed none to be made.

"Come indoors—it's cold here," Oriana went on, "I want you to look at those drawings."

There was another silence; then Blanche said with a determined change of manner:—

"Who ever heard of a swimming-bath in a private garden? I never saw one."

"I read about one once—in a book of my father's. It belonged to the Prince of—I can't remember the name. But he was a—an eccentric."

"Is that your intention also?" said Blanche with a smile.

"You will see—if you stay here long enough—" said Oriana with her old sly look. "Let us go in."

The next morning Blanche drove herself in Oriana's new English basket-carriage to Captain Daalgaard's cottage—the last but one of a row of houses opposite the Yssimbault ferry. From the groom who accompanied her Blanche heard that M Daalgaard had already made himself popular on the Marécourt estates; the point which concerned her most—the moment of his withdrawal from the farm-house—was not touched on and she asked no questions.

It was a wild bright morning. The waves thundered up over

the sand and the breeze banged the doors and shutters of the little house ; the sun blazed down between the clouds. Blanche got out of the chaise and walked up a path bordered with shells to the porch. There was no answer to her knocking and she stepped through the half-open door to find herself in a narrow passage of bleached pitch-pine, smelling faintly of lavender and the sea. The crash and roar of the waves covered her footsteps and she went on through the door immediately in front of her. This first empty room gave on to a wooden verandah with a glass roof ; and now Blanche found herself in a square enclosed promontory some six feet above the seashore.

In a chaise-longue, near the balustrade, lay Charles Daalgaard. His face was turned away and he did not see her. Mme de Freysac was sitting in a low chair at the foot of his, a book in her hand ; for a moment or two she continued to read aloud ; then she saw Blanche and got up ; Daalgaard slowly turned his eyes on Blanche as she came forward.

The meeting passed off very smoothly. Blanche and Zoë exchanged curtsies and the older woman excused herself almost at once, telling her cousin that she would return during the course of the day. Blanche sat down and picked up the book she had been reading.

"Do you know it?" said Daalgaard ; he spoke as if he really wanted to know the answer.

Blanche was thinking that he had a better colour than when she had last seen him ; her attention was on his appearance and she said hurriedly :—

"No—yes—I have read it. I am sorry to see you ill again."

"I had quite—at least, nearly recovered, a week ago. I was so foolish as to start riding—it will be a long time before I shall be able to take that up again."

"I suppose—the jarring—" ventured Blanche. She would not have embarked on such a matter in her own country ; but this young man's direct and serious manner made her speak to him as if they had known each other a long while. As she broke off she saw that he was suppressing a smile.

"Yes—it was the jarring—" he said gravely, "but I shall be about again before long, I believe."

"Is there a good doctor here?" Blanche enquired.

"O ! yes, thank you—he can only say what the others have said, in any case."

"And—that is—"

"Rest—it is a word I shall be glad never to hear again," said Captain Daalgaard, with a return to his impenetrable manner.

"You have always led a very active life?"

Blanche found herself slipping back into her usual methods of conversation quite easily, and the sensation was a pleasant one. But Daalgaard did not appear anxious to talk. Now that she looked at him more closely she saw that he was unnaturally flushed ; his eyes were restless ; he made some enquiry and then hardly listened to the answer, following it up with another question ; she became aware that he was in pain and wanted not sympathy, but distraction, and so she began to talk about her busy week at the Villa, of her difficulties with the chef, a highly strung Italian. Daalgaard listened and even laughed a little, the flush on his thin cheek coming and going. Once, when she bent down to pick up her netting, she saw that he had shifted his position with a grimace ; but he seemed to want her not to mind him and she went on talking.

Presently Blanche began to wonder whether he was alone in the house ; she made some enquiry and was told that the elderly fisherman and his wife to whom the cottage belonged were looking after him.

"Are they here now?"

"They are gone to the market, I believe. But I'm not helpless—I can get upstairs, not very elegantly," the young man replied, "I like to be alone. I have always—that is to say, I was used to solitude—and army life creates the desire for it."

Blanche would have liked to hear more ; but the speaker was beginning to look grim, and she changed the subject, inwardly wondering whether she ought to leave him ; she was casting about for some way of finding out how soon his landlord would be back when the door on to the verandah shut smartly, and she looked up with a sense of relief. Oriana was standing in the dark beamed arch of the doorway.

She looked past Blanche at Daalgaard, who was beginning to lift himself from his pillows. She put out her hand and said abruptly :—

"Don't move—I came to see how you were."

Charles Daalgaard's haggard eyes were fixed on his employer's

wife ; it seemed to Blanche quite a long time before he sank slowly back, his glance still held. Then he said quietly :—

“I am very much better, thank you, Madame. Perhaps Mademoiselle will be so good as to fetch you a chair from indoors.”

Oriana advanced towards the chaise-longue and paused a moment, apparently unaware that Blanche had risen. She walked to the balustrade and stood there, leaning back a little, the white-flecked jade and aquamarine of the sea her background ; she did not move, and Charles Daalgaard continued to look at her.

Oriana was in riding dress ; her habit, the skirt of which she had looped over one arm, was of steel-grey corded velvet ; as she moved it gleamed with a dim cold light. She wore long grey mousquetaire gloves and boots, and her plumed hat and flowing veil were of dark purple : a bunch of purple violets, their leaves and petals shining with moisture, was pinned at her neck ; she had a little silver whip in her hand, and she held it across her breast ; her skin was golden and her eyes very bright beneath their drooping lashes. She looked at Daalgaard’s recumbent figure as if he were some dead creature laid out for her inspection : there was something curiously possessive, judging and absorbed about her expression ; then she moved a little to one side, so that he could see the line of her throat and breast beneath the tight-fitting ridges of her dress.

Daalgaard appeared neither embarrassed nor solicitous ; his strained flushed look sank away, leaving him intent and serene. It was Blanche who broke the silence by saying that she must be going—had Oriana come to fetch her ?

“You left your basket in the carriage—” said Oriana in an indifferent tone ; she turned and looked away over the verandah.

Blanche went to fetch the fruit. When she came back Oriana had not moved.

“It is very kind of the Comte de Marécourt to send me these,” said Daalgaard gently, “and of you, Mademoiselle, to bring it to me.”

“Are you well looked after here ?” said Oriana, suddenly twisting round and speaking in a distant tone.

Captain Daalgaard looked amused ; it occurred to Blanche that he must have heard of Oriana’s unpredictable manners : he seemed indifferent to or at least unaffected by her condescension.

“When will you be well again ?” she pursued.

"In a week or two, I hope, Madame. I have been foolish—I shall know better another time."

"Is it your wound—or did you catch a chill?"

"A little of both."

"I hope you will be quite well soon."

"Thank you, Madame."

Oriana drew the lash of her whip across her lips ; she seemed a little put out by this imperturbability.

"Won't you sit down ?" said Daalgaard after a pause, indicating the empty chair.

"O ! we must go—mustn't we, Blanche ?" replied Oriana, with a sudden coquettish sidelong glance ; patronage having failed to disturb, she was trying another method. "Are you well enough to read, then ? What's that book ?—" picking it up before he could answer.

Blanche had always thought it odd to see Oriana with a book ; she never handled one as if she could read, but used a gingerly, teasing touch, like a kitten with a reel of silk. Daalgaard began to smile as he looked at her.

"I often read aloud—don't I, Blanche ?" she continued, fluttering the pages. "What's this ? Is it a love-story ?"

"Yes."

"A sad one ?"

"Yes, Madame."

"O ! they're always hateful," said Oriana, pouting. "Good heavens—listen to this—" and she read in her hoarse, childish voice :—

"Pardonnez si j'achève en peu de mots un récit qui me tue. Je vous raconte un malheur qui n'eut jamais d'exemple. Toute ma vie est destinée à le pleurer."

"Is that really what happens ? Does it end there ?"

"Very nearly," said Daalgaard, with his faint bitter smile.

"Well, I like happy endings—" said Oriana, employing another sidelong glance.

The opening was obvious ; Charles Daalgaard did not use it : he continued to look at her.

"I really think we should go now," said Blanche gently.

"Yes—well—did you bring Monsieur any flowers ?"

"I believe I forgot. To-morrow, perhaps—"

"To-morrow ! Here are some for to-day—" said Oriana, unpinning the violets from her neck, and speaking in an oddly gentle tone, for once neither provocative nor patronising. "Would you like these ?" and she put them into his hands.

Charles Daalgaard took up the flowers without speaking ; his eyelids dropped as he held the purple bouquet in front of him. When at last he raised his eyes it seemed to Blanche that they were full of tears ; she could never be sure, for he lowered them again immediately, and said, with his polite, formal gravity :—

"Thank you, Madame."

Oriana was now aware of Blanche's disapproving expression ; she held out her hand, which Daalgaard took but did not kiss ; it seemed as if he were unwilling, even for that short space of time, to turn away his eyes. Then she curtsied perfunctorily and moved towards the door.

As they went out Blanche turned to say good-bye ; she saw that Daalgaard had raised himself to see the last of them ; he flinched, shut his eyes and became livid and ghastly. She was about to turn back ; but he shook his head and muttered :—"Please go, Mademoiselle—I shall do very well—thank you—" and Blanche obeyed.

CHAPTER 3 *The First Quarrel*

A FEW days after the return of the newly married couple to Marécourt Blanche sent Alfred Marchant a letter of reassurance. She described her colloquy with Zoë de Freysac. In the postscript she added :—

"You were right about one aspect of the situation here. Captain D. has been and I think will continue to be used by Mme. de F. pour se faire valoir with both the Comte de M. and his father. The Duc de R. has left for Provence in a huff, having first ordered and then implored this wicked woman to accompany him ; the Comte de M. told me this himself : he is, of course, delighted to think that she prefers to remain in his vicinity. It is intolerable ; but I can assure you that I intend to have nothing to do with this imbroglio. My own belief is, that,

odd as it may seem, Captain D. is deeply attached to her, and will not céder le pas to M. de M. who will eventually return to his wife. Meanwhile I repeat, have no fears for my safety, as she no longer threatens it."

Blanche felt this last phrase to be disingenuous ; her interview with Zoë de Freysac had convinced her only of the lady's duplicity ; she did not for one moment believe that she had meant what she said about the desecration of the Villa being a fatal act ; that was just talk ; no one could feel more deeply for a house—or the interior decoration of a house—than for power over another human being. Blanche's conviction on this point extended to a mental re-enactment of the whole drama of the Villa ; she discounted Jean Desmarests' opinion : it was her own establishment as ruler of the Marécourt family that Mme de Freysac desired : and she was luring Aymon from his wife with that end in view, possession of the Villa being a secondary matter.

A week later Alfred Marchant replied :—

"Your postscript touched on the heart of the matter. Bring your imagination to bear on what would have happened if you had not acted and this woman had had her way. Picture the young couple in the Château or at Paris—far better for them, by the way, that the old folk should retire to Provence—and the ex-mistress in the Villa where, considering her age, she would probably have been perfectly content to let well alone and occupy herself with its restoration, re-decoration or what not. Now, in spite and revenge, she is thrusting herself between husband and wife. I'm sure I don't care how it ends, as long as you are safe. But think over what I have said."

To which Blanche replied :—

"What you visualise might have happened. But it would have been morally wrong. They are evil and outrageous customs that arbitrate for such a system as you imagine. I cannot and will not subscribe to them. A little time, and all, I believe and hope, will be well. Then how thankfully I shall come Home."

Blanche did not add that she looked on Charles Daalgaard's tenure of his post as temporary ; as soon as he was—well, strong enough—(she did not care to dwell on that aspect of the affair) he would have no difficulty in ousting Aymon ; she believed that he and his cousin would then retire to Paris and that all would prosper for Oriana.

This being settled in her mind, the question of Daalgaard's health became paramount. She visited him regularly ; it was customary for her to walk down nearly every day to his cottage with books or fruit and flowers ; on these occasions Oriana generally called for her and they would return together. But the young man's recovery seemed slow and Blanche grew a little discouraged. She was extremely careful of Oriana's participation in these visits ; distrusting both the girl's susceptibility and the effect of her beauty, she took care to leave as soon as Oriana arrived, so that the Comtesse de Marécourt and her husband's agent or steward, as Aymon preferred to call him, seldom spent more than a few minutes together and were never alone.

During these times Daalgaard said very little ; his manner was perfect, Blanche considered, quite free from the over-familiar and odious gallantries that Oriana's looks and naïveté had all too often evoked in Parisian circles ; and the girl herself seemed to have relinquished her coquettish address for something more gentle and womanly.

Aymon also was in the habit of visiting Daalgaard ; he complained bitterly of the tedium of having to ride half a mile whenever he wanted to consult his steward ; and one evening when the Duchesse de Roncesvaulx, Blanche and Oriana had been sitting at their needlework while he read aloud, he suddenly flung down the book to exclaim :—

“Upon my word and honour, it's intolerable ! Here are these forestry figures still in my pocket—and Daalgaard should have gone through them this morning.”

“Send one of your people—” suggested his mother.

“That's useless—we must go through them together. O ! well—there's nothing for it—I must leave you and go out into this detestable weather—” said Aymon, rising with a shiver.

Oriana gave Blanche a contemptuous look and lifted her shoulders : Blanche, intensely irritated, said quietly :—

"May I make a proposal, Monsieur?" and as Aymon nodded she continued :—"During Captain Daalgaard's convalescence would it not be possible for him to lodge here? Then you would have access to him whenever it was convenient—and I believe he would get well more quickly than in the cottage, where he lives, I understand, quite primitively."

There was silence. Blanche's eyes were fixed on Aymon, whose expression was vacant and cold. She did not see the Duchesse de Roncesvaulx' look of disapproval nor Oriana's brilliant eyes and sudden burning colour.

"What is your opinion, Madame?" said Aymon, turning to his mother.

"It might be a convenient plan—though it does not seem altogether suitable—" she replied coldly.

It was obvious that the idea of having Daalgaard at his beck and call, thus demonstrating daily his situation as a man of affairs, almost outweighed his use as a screen in Aymon's eyes ; and now his mother's attitude was an incentive to show himself as above the lesser conventions. He turned to his wife.

"Would you have any objection to Daalgaard's presence here?"

Oriana was bending over a knot in her thread ; she succeeded in disentangling it before she replied :—"No—none at all."

"I must consider it," said Aymon rather portentously. "He could have the bamboo room, and work in the library." He paused and then added :—"I had better talk it over with him—it won't do for him to feel it's an order."

It was the Duchesse de Roncesvaulx' turn to look disdainful ; she pointed out that the young man was, after all, a foreign refugee and extremely fortunate, considering his reputation.

"My dear Mamma—" said Aymon blandly, walking away, "Captain Daalgaard's political attitude does not in fact exist, if that is what concerns you." He paused to lift his coat-tails and then continued :—"He has not got one, unless you call a dislike of living under Prussian rule—in which I heartily concur—a political faith. He is almost penniless, and—"

"I confess I am astonished to hear you speak contemptuously of country in which we, as a family—"

"O! good heavens, that tedious prefix!" interrupted Aymon, now well into his stride. "Prince of Castell-Rohrau indeed ! Will

it help me to rebuild the farms here? No. Did it benefit me in the regiment? I took care to conceal it, you may be sure. Does the Emperor—not that that concerns me in the least—care that I am a Highness in a few wretched little parishes that I have never seen and never intend to see? Upon my word and honour, Madame, I can assure you—”

“You need say no more,” said the old lady stiffly. “Your ancestors acquired the title you affect to despise when the forbears of the families that now frequent St. Cloud and the Tuileries were at the plough or the loom. In those days—”

“We were what we have now ceased to be,” said Aymon, with the air of an iconoclast making an epigram. “Everything passes. And it seems to me that we have wandered considerably from the point—that of my convenience. You will forgive me for putting an end to fruitless regrets for past glories—” Aymon looked up with some complacency at the vast gilded and painted ceiling of the drawing-room—“While I occupy myself with present utilities in a practical manner.”

Thus the Comte de Marécourt committed himself. He announced the next day that Captain Daalgaard, while professing his gratitude, had asked leave to think over his temporary residence at the Villa; he was, of course, merely diffident, Aymon hastily added; no doubt the thought of daily contact with himself and Oriana and Blanche was a little embarrassing.

“Embarrassing? How?” said Oriana sharply.

Aymon turned to smile down at her. Blanche and Oriana were inspecting the site of the swimming-bath at the furthest end of the gardens, and Aymon had just joined them with his news.

“Well—” he said considerably, “Daalgaard’s a very good fellow—a bit dull and slow, perhaps, but the Danes *are* heavy, and—and that sort of thing. One is aware that he is merely a farmer turned soldier. If he does come, you ladies must put him at his ease.”

“Zoë de Freysac did not seem to find him dull,” said Oriana.

Aymon grew crimson; for a moment he had nothing to say; then he replied coldly:—“Mme de Freysac has a kind and generous heart. I could wish that you—”

“O! I’m sure she’s all heart!” Oriana exclaimed. “I will take your word for that!”

"Oriana—" expostulated Blanche in a low voice.

The girl turned upon her and burst into a loud angry laugh.
"O ! very well—I should not have mentioned her, of course."

"Am I to understand then that you object to Daalgaard's visit here ?" said Aymon in his most dignified manner.

"Good heavens, no—ask whom you like—it's no matter to me," said Oriana, subsiding.

Aymon looked pleasurabley embarrassed, as he usually did when his words had had an effect, of no matter what kind ; he continued to walk along between the two women ; presently he offered Oriana his arm, which she took hastily, as if aware that she had made a fool of herself ; at this point Blanche judged it best to fall behind and leave them together.

Later that afternoon Blanche received a summons from Oriana ; she found her dressing for dinner at an unusually early hour ; bed, chairs and sofa were covered with evening gowns. This uncertainty was not characteristic ; and Blanche at once concluded that Captain Daalgaard was expected. As soon as they were alone she raised the point in a joking manner.

Oriana ran forward and flung her arms round Blanche's neck. She had not been so demonstrative for a long while ; as the older woman returned the impetuous pressure she felt the girl's burning cheek against her own. Presently Oriana murmured in a cajoling, plaintive tone :—

"I was rude, wasn't I ? But I told him I was sorry."

"I thought you would," said Blanche encouragingly ; she paused, and then added in her low impressive tone :—"This—this predilection will pass. Ignore it—don't refer to it, ever."

Oriana had disengaged herself ; she gave her friend a long odd look ; then she said in a deliberately expressionless manner :—

"Do you know why he—why Captain Daalgaard left the farmhouse ?"

"No—" said Blanche, a little surprised.

"She made him—so that the coast should be clear for Aymon."

"How do you know ?"

"Jeanne told me—she had it from—"

"Oriana, this spying and gossiping is—is worse than unladylike—it is horribly undignified—and quite pointless."

"I know," replied Oriana placidly, looking down at her dressing-gown and pleating it between two fingers. "I shan't do it any more."

"I wish I could believe you," said Blanche with a sigh.

"That was all I wanted to know, in any case."

"Till next time, I suppose?"

Oriana suddenly looked up with the same queer, thoughtful expression; it was that of a much older woman, and Blanche began to feel at a disadvantage. Oriana dropped her hands at her sides.

"I shall never want to know anything more about her," she declared.

"I am glad to hear it."

"I do love you, Blanche darling—are you happy here?"

"Of course, dear child, very happy—and—I hope—"

"What?"

"Useful too—not only in the obvious practical ways—but—" Blanche paused in order to put her intention with greater accuracy, "—in making your life—not always an easy one, I know—happy and useful."

Oriana did not colour up easily or often. She did so now; then she gave an embarrassed laugh. "O! Aymon and I get on very well—" she said in a careless tone.

There was a pause.

"Dear Oriana—when your greatest happiness comes—when your children—"

At this delicate moment she was interrupted by Oriana's high-pitched giggle.

"Children! Why have *you* never had any?"

"I did not marry, you see," replied Blanche, ignoring this sudden and unattractive change of tone. "And then I had my work. My life has been very full—just as yours will be."

At the last phrase Oriana's glance stole to the mirror: her expression was not, as so often, one of cool and insolent triumph, but of a slow and absorbed realisation; it was as if she saw herself for the first time. She went over to the ormolu dressing-table, took out a necklace and a bracelet and put them back again; the blush sank away, but her eyes still glittered; her hands were trembling as she shut the lid, and she seemed to be trying to suppress

either a laugh or a sob of nervous excitement. Blanche said lightly :—

“And what about your dress for this evening? Have you not been able to make up your mind?”

Oriana looked absently at the scattered finery. “Yes—that one”—she said, indicating a pile of lilac silk muslin.

“Shall I dress quickly and come back and talk to you?”

Oriana nodded; she was gradually regaining her composure; as Blanche reached the door she said without turning round :—

“Captain Daalgaard is coming to stay here—did he tell you?”

“I have not seen him to-day—but I guessed he was going to be here for dinner,” replied Blanche with a smile.

Oriana was still looking into the mirror; she caught Blanche’s eye, but did not return her smile; it was plain that her thoughts were elsewhere, and as she walked back to her own rooms Blanche concluded that the scene of reconciliation in the garden—the first, for the young couple had not as yet quarrelled openly—was absorbing all Oriana’s attention. It was an excellent sign. She discounted the girl’s over-preoccupation with her toilette. “Little puss, she intends to break Captain Daalgaard’s heart as well, I suppose”—Blanche concluded tolerantly; and it occurred to her that it would not come amiss for the Comte de Marécourt’s complacency to be ever so little disturbed.

As she began to dress a book that she had borrowed from Daalgaard caught her eye; it was the one that Zoë de Freysac had been reading to him that first afternoon. She took it up. It fell open, flatly and at once, at the passage that Oriana had read aloud.

“Pardonnez si j’achève en peu de mois un récit qui me tue. Je vous raconte un malheur qui n’eut jamais d’exemple. Toute ma vie est destinée à le pleurer.”

The words brought back the little pitch-pine verandah, the sound of the sea and of Oriana’s voice, her teasing side-glances—and nothing more, except a slight uneasiness: As soon as she was dressed, for no reason that she could define, Blanche took up the volume again; it opened at the same place, as if it had been marked; but there was nothing else to show that it had been constantly re-read or left open at that particular place, and she dismissed it from her mind.

CHAPTER 4 *The Wounded Hero*

WHEN Charles Daalgaard came into the long gallery Blanche was alone. In the days of Hippolyte de Roncesvaulx this had been a Chinese room and part of the original decoration, etiolated almost to transparency, still remained ; Jean Desmarests' craftsman had filled in the gaps in his favourite *trompe-l'œil* style with paintings of grottoes : so that Daalgaard's tall limping figure came slowly towards Blanche through a vista of fanciful and elaborate *rocaille*. His melancholic pallor rose coldly against the fainting blues and aqueous greens and purples as from a bell-glass ; if it had nothing in common with the finicking mandarins and monkeys of the Regency, it correlated at least with the marine twilight of a later imagery. When he had greeted Blanche he looked round and smiled slightly. She begged him to sit down.

"No, thank you, Mademoiselle. I am not tired."

He continued to gaze about him with a mild and impenetrable glance. Blanche asked him what he thought of the wall-paintings.

"They are extraordinary," he replied after a pause. "No one but an Italian would have let seaweeds and waves rush in between those monkeys and pagodas. They are a fantastic people."

"You don't care for it—the modern painting?"

"Well, yes—I do—" he replied in his gentle voice. "It is ludicrous—don't you think so?"

Blanche laughed. "That is not my criterion—is it yours?"

Daalgaard went up to one of the wall-paintings and leaning on his stick, peered at it for a moment before replying.

"What I mean is—" he said slowly, "he has not tried to connect the old style with the new—he has dashed on and over it in a kind of tidal wave—but you see the old designs have re-emerged in spite of that. A French decorator would have copied them, correctly and well. This fellow has a bolder tradition behind him—and it is comical—at least to me it is, to realise how extravagantly it can persist."

"I gather then that you find it too droll to be admirable?"

"O ! no—why should I? I like things I can laugh at—and I admire courage."

"I call that a very complicated view," said Blanche smiling.

Daalgaard turned and glanced at one of the Chinese panels. "I seldom see anything as complicated to admire—" he said, as if speaking to himself.

Blanche had not before seen him in such a talkative mood ; it was the pleasantest moment they had had together. At this point Aymon de Marécourt came in and greeted his guest with geniality, almost with affection. The conversation wandered from the gallery to the Villa, and Aymon asked Daalgaard if he had seen over it all.

"Yes—I was so privileged—" said Daalgaard, so gently that the faint irony in his tone was almost imperceptible. "It is very strange—very beautiful."

"Are you a connoisseur of the sort of thing ?" enquired Aymon, with a wave of the hand.

"No—I should not say that, exactly."

"Ah ! well, we are all connoisseurs here, you know," said Aymon between raillery and condescension. "All, that is, except Mademoiselle—" smiling at Blanche.

"There must be one amateur surely, to listen to the experts ?" said Daalgaard.

"Hah !—very good—now there are two of you. We shall be a happy quartette."

Captain Daalgaard murmured that he had no doubt of it : his expression was subservient and amiable. Aymon seemed unaware of the sardonic inflection and continued :—"Now in your country, do you—"

He was interrupted as the double doors at the end of the gallery were flung open to admit his wife. She came slowly up the room, her eyelids lowered, a correct young matron ; one might almost have said that she was a little timid.

And suddenly as Blanche watched her a violent and painful resentment filled all her heart. For the first time in her life she envied Oriana. She remembered her own girlhood, and the memory was bitter. No one—at least, no man of personable appearance—had ever looked at her as these two were looking at her pupil. And as if that were not enough, she must despise herself utterly for this sour, middle-aged jealousy : for she knew that its source was to be found in what she contemptuously termed a sentimentality for Charles Daalgaard. All at once she realised that her

concern for his health, her pleasure in his good spirits sprang from some deeper inspiration than her care for Oriana's concerns. Odious, odious weakness ! She forced herself to face it, assessing once more all that Oriana had to give—wealth and ease, beauty, youth ; these were Blanche's responsibilities, and so partly her own : that must be her consolation.

The process of self-identification is a dangerous one for the mature spinster ; Blanche Peverence submitted herself to it without awareness as without delay. In an absurd, incredible flash she saw her own image as another's : and so added the last ingredient to the mixture of obstinacy, creation, endeavour, heedlessness and conscience that she had used in her adventure. Now she herself was the heroine—the outlines were Oriana's.

At the last moment that young lady's caprice had rejected the delicate and frivolous gown she had originally chosen for one of the harshest magenta, trimmed with heavy black braid ; it was an eminently conventional dress, the sort that a young girl recently married into a respectable and distinguished family would be bound to have in her wardrobe, and it had in fact been bought for Oriana by her mother-in-law. The colour had been the extreme of the fashion some years back : a lace bertha exposed her shoulders as in the 'fifties ; her bracelets and earrings were of jet, studded with diamonds : she wore no other jewels. It was plain that she was aware of the value of contrast ; the strident bluish-purple gave her glimmering and opulent curves bloom and richness ; the atmosphere of reserve created by her appearance was perfectly enhanced by her manners : she gave Daalgaard the tip of one finger and the shred of a modest glance : and they all went in to dinner.

Half an hour later Aymon was still in the process of "drawing out" his guest. Their respective positions gave him enough self-confidence to be able to listen, and he was even prepared to admire a little : but Daalgaard did not seem willing to enlarge on his experiences in the army, and his employer was therefore reduced to repeating such information as he had been able to obtain.

"You don't have conscription in Denmark, then ? Isn't that rather a pity ?"

Charles Daalgaard was looking at his plate ; there was a pause before he replied, without raising his glance :—"It would merely have prolonged a hopeless struggle."

"Now you yourself had no military training, I think?" Aymon went on.

"My father wished me to become a soldier—I joined the army when I was sixteen."

"I see. And you had quitted it some years before—before—"

"I sent in my papers when I was nineteen."

"Did you indeed? And then?"

"I became a student at the Sorbonne."

"Ah! that accounts for your excellent French—what happened then?"

"I remained in Paris for three years. Then my father died."

"And you had to come home?"

"Yes. It was my intention not to stay—but my brother and his wife were at that time leaving for America, and my mother was alone."

"So you stayed on?"

"Yes—for eight years. Then my mother died, and I went to Italy."

Aymon's face fell a little. "You seem to have travelled a good deal," he said with a short laugh.

"Yes—I used to take my mother to visit our cousins in Russia every summer."

"So you speak Italian and Russian besides French?" Blanche put in.

"Not well."

"My dear fellow, you're too modest!" Aymon exclaimed. "Your French is admirably pure."

"My other languages are less fluent—we used always to talk French with my Russian cousins."

There was a pause.

"Upon my word," said Aymon, glancing round the room, "I could almost envy you."

Daalgaard's face was expressionless; his look also travelled round the table: just as it reached Oriana's brilliant and eager gaze he let it fall. "Almost—" he said quietly.

"Well—you have been unfortunate. But you would agree with me that modern warfare has its interesting moments?"

Daalgaard looked up. "O! yes—" he said in an artificial, rapid tone, "Certainly."

"Quite so. Now—from your point of view—what appealed to you most? The strategic, or the administrative side?"

Daalgaard looked again at his employer and then away; he put his hands on either side of his plate, glanced down at them for a moment and then raised his eyes.

"It is—rather difficult—" he said deliberately, "to explain these—such technicalities."

"Don't be afraid of boring the ladies," said Aymon smiling. "You can be sure of their interest."

Daalgaard glanced past Blanche at Oriana; her lips were parted and she had dropped her chin on her hands. The hard cold composure of his expression quivered and broke; he swept his hands under the table, knocking down a knife as he did so; then he said slowly:—

"The technique of killing a number of individuals before they can kill you—partly consists in ignoring a good deal."

"I am sure you ignored your own danger," Aymon courteously put in.

"If I had, I should not be here now."

There was another and longer silence. Blanche's embarrassment was overborne by her concern for Daalgaard who was smiling fixedly. Aymon cleared his throat and said easily:—

"Naturally, ah—common-sense—forms a part of—"

"Of running away when you are beaten? Yes, it must, and it does."

"If you will forgive my saying so, you had no chance."

"We became aware of that shortly after we were invaded."

"Why didn't you give in, then?" asked Oriana. Daalgaard's cold disgust seemed to melt as he looked at her. He said gently:—

"Some of us did, Madame. Some deserted to the enemy."

"And what happened to them?"

"Those who were caught were shot, naturally. The others were taken prisoner by the Prussians."

There was another silence; Aymon looked significantly at the two women, as if to say, "You see, I knew I should get him to talk—" and they all waited. Then Daalgaard continued in a quiet, narrative tone:—

"At one point, when we were retreating from one island to

another, three men and an officer in my company were caught and brought in. I had known the young lieutenant—he was nineteen—since his boyhood. He asked me to shoot him myself, and I did."

"Terrible—" said Aymon, after a suitable pause, and Blanche repeated "Terrible—" averting her eyes. Oriana was still looking at Daalgaard. She said quickly :—

"How did you feel—afterwards?"

"Very cold. I wanted a drink too."

Oriana drew a long breath. "You could have refused to do it?" she asked, leaning forward.

"It did not occur to me at the time. I was thinking about our next move—we were fighting across the islands. I was afraid there might not be enough boats."

"And then? What happened then?"

"You are too insistent," said Aymon, with a wave of the hand. "These are fearful memories, are they not, my dear Daalgaard? Let us talk of something else."

Charles Daalgaard looked straight ahead of him and his eyes flashed ; for a moment it seemed as if irritation and contempt were going to find an outlet in a torrent of words or a violent exclamation ; then his glance became steady and cold ; he turned to Oriana, and said in the gentle voice that he had only for her :—

"There is very little else to tell you, Madame. There—at the last island—I was wounded, not very seriously, in the back of the thigh. But the tendons were injured, and I was helpless. They had to go on without me."

"They left you behind?" Blanche exclaimed.

"There was no alternative. I had some brandy and a piece of biscuit. I lay on my face. Then the sun rose, and the Prussians shelled our positions." He paused, fingering the stem of his wine-glass. "I was very tired. I had not slept for a long time."

"Couldn't you drag yourself along?" said Oriana.

"I tried to. I did get a little way. Then a shell burst and I was wounded again. There was no moving after that. But I was lucky."

"How—lucky?"

"My spine was bruised, but not gravely injured. I was wounded where it mattered least. My legs were all right too."

Oriana looked horrified ; Blanche turned crimson. Daalgaard contemplated them both for a moment, and then said with a smile :—

“I know, I was not wounded in the right place. I lay on my face for many months after that, in various hospitals. In Paris—” he broke off, shook his head and began to laugh.

“What happened in Paris ?” asked Aymon.

“One day, when I had not been there very long, we were told that the Empress had arrived. Naturally, it would not have done for a lady, least of all for one in her position, to have to see a—an officer and a gentleman, in mine. So they put the screens round my bed, and I heard the nurse tell her that I was too ill to see anyone.” He looked up, and Blanche and Aymon allowed themselves to laugh with him. Oriana flushed hotly.

“That was a shame !” she declared.

“No, no. A great many ladies came to see us. Their susceptibilities had to be considered.”

“It was unfair !”

“There are conventions of war, Madame, as M de Marécourt will tell you. Come back with your shield, or on it, was one—all your wounds in front is another.”

“But you had done nothing cowardly—you had to retreat ?” Oriana persisted.

“Yes—I obeyed orders—” said Daalgaard with his slight ironical smile.

“Would you have preferred not to ?” Blanche enquired.

“I should have been very glad to retreat more quickly. A covering action was necessary at some points—none of us liked that, of course.”

Oriana’s face fell again ; Charles Daalgaard continued to smile as he looked at her but without satire or malice ; her open disappointment seemed to please and amuse him.

“Courage is a curious thing—” interposed Aymon, with his air of exposition. “I have been absurdly frightened on one or two occasions—but never, I must admit, when there was danger. The first time I called a man out—”

“The first time ?” interrupted Oriana.

“Well—the only time, then—I was absolutely calm. What do you make of that, Daalgaard ?”

"I have no experience of those activities. I suppose you are a good shot?"

"Pretty fair. But there's always the chance that the other fellow will be a better one."

"I should like to see a duel," put in Oriana.

"We might stage one for you, Madame. It will be the affair of a second or two if I have anything to do with it," said Daalgaard.

Oriana pouted. "I meant swords—" she said with one of her sidelong glances.

"Ah! that is another matter."

"Why are women so bloodthirsty?" Aymon exclaimed.

"We are at a disadvantage as spectators," said Blanche. "It is expected of us in the world where such things occur."

"Well, I'm no fire-eater," said Aymon, "but upon my word, there are some situations where nothing else—"

"Not in England, Monsieur."

"You knock each other down, don't you?"

"No—we keep our tempers."

Oriana laughed. Daalgaard suppressed a smile, and Aymon flushed. "We have digressed from the particular to the general," he said hastily. "I believe Daalgaard has not yet answered my first question."

"And that is?"

"What part of your duties as an officer interested you most?"

"In peace or in war?"

"O—both."

"Well—in peace I disliked the army. I evaded my duties and my companions. In war—there is very little time—for long hours one does not think at all. You are cold and dirty and bored when there is not a great deal to do—when there is, you are cold and dirty and frightened—or angry—sometimes both."

Aymon looked superior. Daalgaard had spoken as if in recollection; now he became aware of his employer's expression and of the shocked and disappointed faces of the women. He shook his head.

"I really know nothing of war," he said mildly. "A retreat is not a battle. You should have spoken to a young Prussian lieutenant of cavalry whom we captured—I remember him very well. He had had all the correct experiences."

"And what were they?" Blanche enquired.

"O! he had led a charge—and his horse had been shot down under him. Then he had a slight flesh-wound in the arm—and a decoration."

"Was he handsome?" Oriana asked.

"I think he was. He had beautiful boots. I remember he told me he had bought them in London."

Blanche laughed outright. Daalgaard was now looking at his plate with a reminiscent smile; his attitude seemed to puzzle Oriana and annoy Aymon: she was silent: he said ponderously:—

"You must not let your—ah—your sad experiences embitter you, my dear fellow. Nothing is—ah—nothing is irrevocable."

"Nothing, indeed," replied Daalgaard smoothly. "I remind myself constantly of my good fortune—" and he lifted his glass to Aymon, with the expression of imitative and satirical courtesy that Blanche had noticed before. Aymon only saw the gesture; he bowed and drank. Oriana exclaimed:—

"Good fortune! To have lost your home, and—" she hesitated, suddenly confused.

There was a pause. Daalgaard looked at Oriana gravely; she met his glance with a rising colour; then he said without any of the mockery or harshness that had so far informed his conversation:—

"I beg you to believe, Madame, that I do indeed count myself lucky. I am alive—and I have met with nothing but kindness here in France."

"But you would rather be in your own country," insisted Oriana, and her husband frowned.

"Indeed I would not."

"You can be a wounded hero in this one," said Aymon with a slightly acid smile.

"Not among those like yourself, who know all about me. But I shall hope to impress others who do not," replied Daalgaard.

"In the meantime you have told us a great many interesting things," said Aymon graciously, with a look at his wife that meant she had sat there long enough.

As they all got up Oriana gave Daalgaard a furtive, puzzled glance. The cold impassivity that was perhaps his habitual defence had descended on him once more and he did not again look towards her.

"I didn't know—" said Oriana after a pause, when she and Blanche were alone, "that war was like that—did you?"

Blanche considered a moment. "No—I don't know if we should have pressed him to talk of it."

"Does it make those things worse—to talk of them?"

"It may. I'm not sure."

Oriana gave her companion a long odd look; she said nothing. Presently Blanche heard her sigh; then she said in a low voice:—

"Will he—will he go back there, ever?"

"It seems unlikely."

"Why did it happen? How can—why did no one help them?"

"The Danes? That's a very difficult question—you have heard it discussed many times."

"I never listened—I didn't know—why should people have to lose their homes?"

"Not many did. Now that the fighting is over a great number of Danes have simply become Prussians—or Austrians."

"And he did not?"

"I don't know all his reasons. I don't think they want people back who—who won't submit—it's a very complicated—"

"But it's unfair!" Oriana exclaimed.

"Indeed it is. I wish I could tell you more. I have been struck by one thing—"

"What?"

"That Captain Daalgaard does not pity himself—therefore perhaps we should not."

"How do you mean?"

"He has made no capital out of these terrible experiences. I very much doubt if he would have spoken of them at all if we had not so urged him."

"But is he unhappy—now, here—with us?"

Blanche looked surprised. "I don't know—" she said at last. "Happiness comes from within—he seems able to enjoy—"

"But he's ill—how can he enjoy things?"

"Does it concern you so deeply?"

Oriana rubbed her cheek and looked at the ground; she seemed unaware of her friend's slightly quizzical expression. "I don't like people to be sad—" she murmured at last; then looking up and meeting Blanche's eye, she exclaimed:—

"Don't laugh at me ! Why are you laughing ?"

"Who is laughing at whom ?" said Aymon's voice. "Are you two ladies disagreeing with one another ?"

Oriana turned away and Blanche shook her head with a smile.

"Now we have come to beg for a little music," went on Aymon, motioning his companion to a chair. "Will you be so obliging, Madame ?"

Oriana swept round to look at the guest ; for a moment Blanche thought she was going to begin their dinner-table conversation all over again. Then, as Aymon repeated his request, she consented with a nod and he brought her the guitar.

"What shall I sing ?"

"Have you any favourites, Daalgaard ?"

"May we hear one of the songs of old France—as Madame la Comtesse is so kind ?"

Oriana bent her head and considered, smiling a little ; then her husky, fluting voice rose on the quiet room.

*"Ah ! s'il est dans votre village
Un Berger sensible et charmant. . . ."*

Charles Daalgaard's face was in shadow ; he sank back, his eyes half closed. Aymon leant a little forward ; it was in these moments that his wife pleased him most ; he gave her a proprietary look of approval as he composed himself to listen.

CHAPTER 5 *Daalgaard Behaves Well*

DURING the first week of his agent's stay at the Villa, Aymon de Marécourt showed an exaggerated consideration for his disabilities ; Mme de Roncesvaulx's censure had produced a carefulness which he abandoned as soon as it irked him.

Captain Daalgaard's condition improved rapidly at this time ; he was able to walk increasingly long distances, and when he and Aymon went out to inspect a piece of land he formed the habit of starting in advance of his employer, who rode to meet him. For a

time this suited the Comte de Marécourt perfectly well. Then one day he took it into his head that everything must be done at a great pace, and instead of giving Daalgaard the necessary warning, announced his intention of visiting a farm some three miles from the Villa a few moments before his horse was brought round. He and Blanche and Daalgaard were together when this decision was made ; Oriana had departed on her daily visit to her mother-in-law.

"You can manage a quiet ride, can you not ?" said Aymon hastily, with one of his flickering, uneasy glances. "I've ordered the Chevalier for you ; he's a very steady creature."

Daalgaard replied "Certainly," in his quietly submissive manner, and began to put his papers together. Blanche glanced from his long thin hands to his unmoved expression ; he had lost his earthy paleness and his face had filled out a little ; but his eyes were still sunken and she suspected that he was not able to sleep when he was over-fatigued. When he had left the room she said in a tentative voice :—

"I wonder if Captain Daalgaard should ride without the doctor's permission ?"

"He must begin some time," said Aymon carelessly, affecting absorption in a list of figures.

"I thought—" "

"Perhaps you would like to drive him in the basket-carriage ?" Aymon interposed with his pinched smile. Daalgaard came back at this point, and he repeated his question. Daalgaard shook his head with a murmur of thanks ; he said nothing and a few moments later he and Aymon had gone. His endurance was not again put to the test ; Aymon, by now fully aware of his usefulness, once more and this time without malice, suggested Blanche's driving him to their more distant rendezvous ; Daalgaard acquiesced in this as in the other arrangements, with courteous impassivity.

During these drives he and Blanche sometimes conversed in English, which he spoke haltingly ; soon, from the grooms, the other servants learnt to see them as a couple. Some word of this came to Oriana and she taxed Blanche with it ; she mockingly accused her friend of unladylike and flirting behaviour ; Blanche replied quietly but with considerable acrimony that such a conclusion was as stupid as it was ill-timed ; she was not likely to supersede Mme de Freysac, even if she so desired.

"What do you mean?" Oriana exclaimed.

"You seem to forget who brought Captain Daa'gaard to this neighbourhood."

For a moment the two women looked at one another ; Oriana's half-shut sleepy eyes glowed and widened ; she began to speak : then she shut her lips tightly and went out of the room.

Till that moment Blanche had not troubled to reconsider Charles Daalgaard's relationship with his cousin ; she had assumed it to be deep and affectionate, based on long-standing comradeship and mutual interests. Zoë de Freysac was the only woman to whom she had heard him speak with the casual freedom of the lover ; his manner towards her was that of an old friend, almost a brother : and her response, though a little less free, was its counterpart. Now, although Mme de Freysac never visited the Villa, he must surely go to see her : he had little time to himself, but once or twice Blanche had seen him walking in the direction of the farm-house ; and presently she gathered from the young man himself that he was in the habit of spending some of his free hours with his cousin.

She could not help thinking him a poor creature for his complaisance towards Aymon ; he seemed quite unresentful of his employer's favoured position, and Blanche could only conclude, with the bitterness she had acquired in the Marécourt circle, that he had long accustomed himself to playing second fiddle when it was required of him.

Meanwhile she began to be aware of the singularity of her own attitude towards Daalgaard. If this was falling in love, it was a dreamy, peaceful process, devoid of anxiety as of passion. They had a good deal in common ; but she liked best to speak to him of her difficulties with Oriana, and he seemed willing enough to listen, though he commented little and advised not at all. There was more than one hiatus in their progress towards intimacy : for neither could speak of Oriana's husband or of her rival. Once or twice when she saw him looking at Oriana she experienced the curious, thrilling pang that was the result of a substitution of which she was hardly aware : then it was she, not the younger woman who answered when his voice took on that half-mocking, wholly appreciative intonation ; and now and then her imagination constructed a picture of herself (as Oriana) with Daalgaard, that had nothing to do with virtue, propriety or the respective positions of either

character. Such *tableaux vivants* were dangerous toys : and she broke them up as soon as she realised what she was doing.

Oriana made no reference to Daalgaard's relationship with his cousin ; but Blanche became aware that her pupil was watching him. By this time he had worked out a daily routine ; he walked or drove round the estate in the afternoon and devoted the mornings to his clerical labours. In the evenings he remained in his own room unless invited by Aymon to join the dining-room party ; and Blanche suspected that the occasions on which he was not so invited were the only moments he had to himself ; for of course he knew better than to call at the farm-house after dusk, which was Aymon's time for going there.

The evening after Oriana had twitted Blanche with what she considered a fictitious partiality for Daalgaard, the two friends found themselves alone together. Aymon had gone to see his mother : and Blanche and Oriana were sitting in the library, the room that now housed M. Desmarests' Wedgwood collection of "jasper" porcelain. The room was ponderous and ornate ; but it had a certain warm magnificence which was all that was needed to relieve the icy blues, greens and greys of the vases, bowls and plaques which filled all the available space. Above the mantelpiece Baudry's portrait of Oriana struck the only incongruous note in the scene.

Oriana was wearing the dress in which she had appeared seven months ago on Blanche's first evening at Yssimbault : and now the Englishwoman, comparing it with others she had recently seen, could not find it bizarre or outrageous ; she made some comment on Oriana's training of her English taste.

"These are the same jewels—my mother's diamonds. Do you remember them ?"

"I do. But why are you ringing the bell ?"

"I want to see Captain Daalgaard—about Sabra."

"The mare ? I thought you were quite satisfied—"

"I can't do anything with her," Oriana interrupted.

"But you are going now to the stables ?"

"No—I just want to tell him about her."

Their last conversation on the subject had made Blanche chary of discussing Daalgaard with Oriana ; she withdrew to her embroidery-frame in the embrasure of a window. Oriana stood by the mantelpiece, staring into the fire.

When Charles Daalgaard came in he appeared more than usually gaunt and severe ; he had none of the social mannerisms that made entries and exits effective in the world Oriana had come to know. She looked at him from beneath her lashes and put out her hand ; she held her handkerchief in the other : a cloud of perfume rose round her.

He gazed at her without speaking ; his glance was unsteady ; then he put both hands quickly behind his back and raised his head, as if he found it easier to look at her so. Oriana leant back a little ; she seemed to sway and glimmer in the firelight, although she moved hardly at all ; the portrait above her was more defined than her uncertain and restless reflection of its painted brightness. Her handkerchief dropped to the floor ; as Daalgaard bent to pick it up she glided away from him, her train rustling between them. He stayed where he was, the handkerchief in his hand ; he held it shakily, clasping and unclasping his fingers through the lace.

"I wanted to speak to you—and now I cannot remember what it was about—" said Oriana at last with her fine lady air.

Daalgaard seemed unable to answer at once ; then he said in a low voice :—

"I am at Madame's service—"

"O ! but are you ?" interrupted Oriana languidly. "You seem to be always busy—don't you work too hard ?"

"I—I like hard work, Madame."

"Do you ? And what do you like next best ?"

"To please my employers—" said Daalgaard with the ghost of his ironical smile.

Oriana looked suddenly grave. "What are you thinking ? I never know—" she said abruptly.

He flinched a little ; then he said quietly :—"I am—I was trying to think what it could have been that you wanted—"

"O ! yes—the new mare—she's impossible."

"The black mare ? She is nervous—at least, I think—" he paused, looking at the ground ; he put his hand to his head as if he could not remember what he was saying.

"I don't think you should ride her—" Blanche put in. "Isn't she vicious ?"

"Of course not," Oriana replied, her eyes still on Daalgaard.
"You don't think that, do you?"

There was a pause. Daalgaard said slowly :—

"I think—she should be ridden by your grooms for a little while yet. She is not used to carrying a lady. With your permission, I will try her myself to-morrow."

"You must not ride," said Oriana peremptorily.

He looked up at her ; again Blanche had the impression that he hardly knew what he was saying.

"I think I might take Sabra round the paddock without any very serious—she won't—"

"No ! No ! My husband made you ride the other day, and it was bad for you—Blanche told me."

Daalgaard was breathing quickly ; at last he said, as if he were forcing out the words :—

"You are very solicitous, Madame. I was none the worse for the expedition."

Oriana, still contemplating him, began to smile ; then with a whispering sweep of her gown she came nearer and put her hand on his arm.

He did not move ; he was staring in front of him ; Oriana's fingers shifted a very little, as if his arm had trembled beneath her hand. He glanced down at the rings and bracelets winking on his sleeve and moistened his lips ; then he raised his eyes to hers. Suddenly his look changed to watchfulness, almost to suspicion ; then it hardened to immobility. Oriana put her head on one side and said softly :—

"Will you promise me something?"

"What is that, Madame?"

"Not to ride—not to tire yourself, until you are really well again. Will you promise?"

He did not answer for a moment or two ; his lips twitched ; now he might have been annoyed or amused, or a little of both ; he seemed to regain some composure as he replied in an extremely gentle yet somehow forbidding tone :—

"You are very good, Madame. I shall do my best to please you."

Oriana looked slightly nonplussed. Then she drew her hand slowly away from his sleeve ; she seemed to ignore the repressive

manner, the emphasis on formality. She sighed and smiled and put her hand up to her hair, shifting her pose and looking away again. Daalgaard had grown very pale ; but he managed to keep his respectful attitude.

Oriana sank into a chair by the fire ; with a return to her languid manner she indicated a stool opposite her and said indifferently :—
“Won’t you sit down ?”

He obeyed her in an awkward fumbling way, unlike his usual deliberate steadiness. Oriana leant back with a relaxed, satisfied movement of her shoulders. He looked up at her and said blankly :—

“I—I must not stay. I have—there is some work to do before the end of the evening.”

“And what are you going to do after that ?”

“I generally go for a little walk before bed-time.”

“In the dark ?”

“I keep very early hours. It will hardly be dusk by the time I—” His voice grew fainter and broke off. There was silence for a moment. Then Oriana said sharply :—

“That depends on what you do—doesn’t it ?”

“Madame ?”

“O ! it doesn’t matter—you had better go if you have so much to do,” said Oriana pettishly ; she opened her fan as if to shield her face from the blaze and put it between them.

Daalgaard got up, his heavy eyes on the fluted black satin barrier ; he said almost inaudibly :—“Is there anything—anything else—that I—”

“Nothing at all—thank you.”

“Then—good night, Madame la Comtesse—”

Oriana sat up, shutting her fan with a snap. “Don’t speak to me as if you were one of the footmen ! ‘Good night, Madame la Comtesse !’ You don’t speak to—to Blanche like that—do you ?”

“I am sorry if I have displeased you.”

“O ! it doesn’t signify in the least. Good night.”

Daalgaard seemed unable to think of an answer. His lips just formed the words, “Good night, Madame—” but no one heard them. He looked quite dazed, and very unhappy. He made a slight bow and left the room.

As soon as the door was shut Oriana sprang up, her eyes blazing. She stamped her foot and burst out passionately :—

“He’s gone now ! Gone to that woman !”

“My dear child, what do you mean ?” Blanche exclaimed, getting up. “What—”

“O ! how can you ask ? You know where he is !”

“Is it any business of yours ?”

“Well !—” Oriana turned on her friend—“that—from you ! You’ve told me she was wicked—well, he shouldn’t go there. She might—she might hurt him.”

“I think that is hardly likely—” said Blanche in an acid tone, “considering that they—that she—”

Oriana broke in with a furious laugh. “Considering what ?”

“Well—”

“Ah ! you think you know everything !”

“My dear—”

“He doesn’t love *her* ! I know that—you’ll see.”

For a moment they continued to look at one another. Blanche’s first sensation was one of triumph—Oriana had spoken with such conviction that the hateful picture of Daalgaard and Zoë de Freysac in one another’s arms shrivelled and faded. Then, aware of the girl’s passionate look, she shrank back. “You—you shouldn’t speak so wildly—” she murmured. “It’s nothing to do with—”

“O ! Blanche—Blanche ! what’s happened ?” and Oriana burst into bitter childish sobbing—“O ! what shall I do ?” and she flung her arms round Blanche’s neck and buried her face on the older woman’s shoulder.

Forcing herself to deny that stealing sense of exhilaration, Blanche murmured endearments, trying to soothe and even to encourage. She almost found herself saying, “How could he think of her when he looks at you ?” and stopped herself in time. “Come—where’s your handkerchief ?” she said finally, in a more bracing tone.

Oriana fumbled automatically, disengaging herself ; then she drew back and looked at Blanche with gleaming eyes. “It’s—it’s not there—” she said with a hesitating puzzled smile.

“Take this one—”

Oriana was still staring at her friend. Suddenly she dashed

the tears from her eyes, clapped her hands and burst into a peal of shrill laughter.

"I haven't got it—don't you see? He didn't give it back to me!" Before Blanche could answer Oriana stepped forward and took her preceptress's grave face between her burning hands; then she said in a low voice with a brilliant smile:—

"Just wait, though—I'll make him give it back to me—he'll be sorry he made me cry."

"Oriana, you must listen to me—you—"

"Ssh! we won't talk about it any more—shall I sing to you? I'm—I was crying about nothing—I don't care what he does."

"What am I to do with you?" Blanche exclaimed.

"Nothing—don't think about it. Shall I read to you? What's that book?"

"*Manon Lescaut*. But—"

"Captain Daalgaard lent it to you, didn't he?"

"Yes."

Oriana had picked up the book; she turned over the pages to the end.

It seemed to Blanche inevitable that she should turn again to the passage she had once idly read aloud. Half smiling, her lashes stuck together with her tears, Oriana softly repeated the phrases that the spinster seemed to hear between the sobs of poor des Grieux' simple and despairing sadness: and intertwined with these fluid rhythms was the memory of the abrupt sentences that had preceded them.

"‘Is it a love-story?’"

"‘Yes.’"

"‘A sad one?’"

"‘Yes, Madame. . . .’"

CHAPTER 6 *Oriana Behaves Badly*

DURING the days that followed Blanche found herself unable to speak to Oriana of anything but trivial matters; every day she got up with a prepared disquisition on wifely duty, modest behaviour and playing with fire; as soon as she was confronted with

her pupil she foresaw all the evasions, the defiant mockery and the emotional outbursts to which she would be subjected, and she became helpless and confused. It must now be faced ; her heroine was in love, and with the wrong man.

Spiritual communication might be efficacious if she could but constrain either her attention or her composure ; but the ordered piety of a tranquil mind was overborne by hectic visions of herself and Oriana and Daalgaard in an endless concatenation of imaginary scenes, where she was at one moment the good genius of the young couple, at another the substituted heroine of a forbidden passion—but never, in any circumstances, the protectress of Aymon de Maré-court's rights as a husband. She could calm her fears by reminding herself that Daalgaard was bound to Zoë de Freysac ; that consolation was bitter, and less effective every hour.

She was increasingly impressed by the consistency of Charles Daalgaard's discretion ; he never sought out Oriana ; it was she who made occasion for their meeting and he who insisted on their respective positions. Yet it was impossible to see him with her—and Blanche still took care that they should never be alone—without feeling that he in some way responded to her demands. The very fact that he abjured gallantry and did not rise to provocation showed a care of which an uninterested person would have been incapable. He remained unmoved—except for a mild amusement—when Oriana was curt or ungracious ; he was gravely polite when she invited familiarity.

It was not to be expected that Aymon would see his young wife as a vulnerable member of the quartette to which he had so complacently referred. Blanche was not surprised that he did not recognise Oriana's absorption in Daalgaard as anything but a fancy for a new face and a different way of talking ; apart from the fact that she had enough sense to restrain herself when her husband was present, he placed Daalgaard as a dull inferior and saw no rival in a man who was exiled, poor and disabled.

Blanche became aware that Daalgaard preferred Oriana's crudest hauteur to her concern for his health or her commiserating enquiries as to his experiences in war.. Oriana was ready to make an issue out of anything that passed between them, however trivial ; as this habit grew Blanche attempted to draw her away. In the milder weather she sat with her on the terrace or in one of the summer-

houses ; two or three days went by before Oriana became aware of the manœuvre.

Naturally Charles Daalgaard dined only with the family and was never asked when any of the neighbours were entertained ; the Riquet-Toustains would have fainted at the suggestion of sitting down to a meal with an employee ; but Philippe de Caumont was frankly envious of the improvements Daalgaard had introduced in his management of the property, and waylaid him in order to ask advice. Aymon then made it clear that he did not keep a steward to help those less fortunate than himself, and so Daalgaard was completely isolated from local society, as completely as his cousin ; Blanche saw them ostracised together, and therefore more than ever dependent on one another.

It was understood that Mme de Roncesvaulx, disapproving of her son's informality with his agent, never met Daalgaard at the Villa. But about this time she formed the habit of calling there unexpectedly, and once or twice she found him enjoying the privileges of a guest. She made no comment and he absented himself as unobtrusively as usual ; yet Blanche had the impression that the old lady was watching her daughter-in-law.

One afternoon at the beginning of April Blanche was sitting alone on the terrace. Oriana had gone to Yssimbault, to select, with Aymon, those pieces in her father's collections which were to form a part of her dowry ; the choice had been left to her, but her husband insisted on sharing it, rather to her annoyance. The knowledge of her absence gave Blanche a feeling of holiday ; she had written up her much neglected journal, and was considering a walk round the gardens when she heard footsteps behind her and turned to see Charles Daalgaard. He told her that he had some letters from an Irish horse-dealer which were beyond him ; his reply must go at once ; together they turned into the library.

"I should think it *was* time they were answered !" Blanche exclaimed, with an amused glance, when they were seated opposite one another at the long tulip-wood table, "This one dates from a fortnight ago."

"You are usually so much occupied," he replied with a faint smile, "I have been awaiting my opportunity."

As she set to work to translate the letters Blanche became aware that he was referring indirectly to his avoidance of Oriana's company ;

he would not have approached Blanche while there was a risk of Oriana's interpreting his plea for help as an excuse to see her.

Her task finished, Blanche was about to leave when she suddenly perceived Daalgaard's altered appearance ; he had been sitting with his back to the window, and now, as he turned towards it, she saw that he was haggard and worn, almost as when they had first met, four months ago. She came back to the table and said, before she could stop herself :—

“I am afraid you are not well—is there anything I could do for you ?”

Daalgaard was sitting with his hands clasped, his eyes lowered ; he did not look up nor did he answer with the cold reserve that she had expected.

“Thank you—I have not been sleeping well.”

There was a pause. “Are you working too hard, perhaps ?” said Blanche tentatively.

“No—I don't think so. I wish I were able to exhaust myself by the end of the day—then the nights would be easier.”

It was so unlike him to speak complainingly that for a moment Blanche could think of no reply ; then the instinct to draw out made itself felt, and she said quietly :—

“You have a great deal on your mind ?”

Daalgaard gave a short laugh, and still without raising his eyes said curtly :—“A great deal—no. Two or three things perhaps.” He lifted his head and looked towards the window. “What does one mean by a great deal on one's mind ? Oneself, I suppose.”

“Do you take anything to make you sleep ?”

“No—I have given up syrups and anodynes,” he replied with an odd, not quite serious intonation.

Again there was silence. Daalgaard's glance was fixed and remote, his expression oblivious of a listener. Blanche said timidly :—

“Do you—do you dislike your work here ?”

“No. It's not the work I mind.”

“The company, then ?” she enquired, half smiling.

“Not yours, Mademoiselle. You have been very kind to me.”

It was impossible to answer such a bleak, bare expression of gratitude, and Blanche made no attempt to do so, sure now that he would soon have something more personal to say. He got up slowly, with the old stiff weariness that he had almost lost ; then

he walked to the furthest window ; as he gazed out over the terraces there was none of the detached, half-mocking scrutiny of a life with which he had nothing to do that she had so often seen in his look when it penetrated his surroundings. Again caution left her, and she said :—

“How old are you ?”

“Thirty-five. Why do you ask ?”

“Because—I don’t know—sometimes you seem just a student, and then sometimes a man of the world.”

“I assure you, I am neither. I ceased to be a student many years ago—and a man without a country or an income has no world—none that he can claim.”

“Don’t we make our own worlds—wherever we happen to be ?”

“Perhaps. I lost what I made.” As she was about to answer he said, looking at her for the first time :—“Don’t misunderstand me. I am not referring to what we have agreed to call my misfortunes—illness, exile, all the rest of it, when I say that I have failed in making something of my position here. That it could have become anything was of course doubtful—now—”

“You are both valuable and necessary here—I know that the Comte de Marécourt thinks so.”

For the first time in their conversation the look of saturnine amusement flitted over his face ; it occurred to Blanche that the remainder of his employer’s existence nearly always caused it. She waited for him to go on.

“I have no doubt of that, Mademoiselle—none at all.”

“Why do you speak so—why are you bitter ?”

Daalgaard came back from the window ; his face had darkened ; he let his hands fall on the back of the chair in which he had been sitting and looking down at them, said slowly :—

“When I managed to get out of Denmark—it was a long, complicated business—I became a subject for charity. You knew that, I suppose ?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Well—for a time I was the pensioner of the French government—or rather of their philanthropical organisations. O ! I’m not so senseless as to complain. I was too ill in any case, to care for that, or for the indignities—” he paused, and then added, with mocking

and deliberate pedantry,—“the inevitable consequences of being wounded as I was. I got used to being an object of ridicule.”

“Ridicule? Surely—”

“By the time my cousin found me at the Hôtel Dieu I was able to laugh about it with the rest of my comrades.” He paused again, frowning a little as if in an effort to remember accurately. “We—she and I—have known each other too long and too intimately to hesitate over accepting favours from one another. She really is my cousin, by the way—I know that no one here believes it.” He looked up at Blanche with a smile.

“I never considered—it is your affair, and hers, of course,” she replied hurriedly, “Please go on.”

Again he seemed to be thinking; then he said:—“It’s odd that the pin-pricks should matter so much—isn’t it?” He glanced sideways at Blanche, laughed rather awkwardly and looked away again.

“I think you will have to be more explicit if you want me to understand.”

“Well—I’ll try to explain. It did not occur to me to resent any of the—incidents—that led up to my arrival in Paris last year. I shared them, after all, with a good many others. No. It was being—picked out—that I—” He stopped with a puzzled look, as if he were not quite sure of what he was saying; then he shook his head and added:—“It’s no good—whatever I say will sound either arrogant or self-pitying.”

“Don’t concern yourself with what it sounds like—I want to hear what it is—” said Blanche, smiling.

“Very well, then. I ceased to resent penury and exile. I accepted pity and cross-questioning—at least, I hope so.”

“Cross-questioning?”

“Well, I can’t say I enjoyed the conversation at dinner that first night—but—”

“It was very hard on you.”

“Not in the least.”

The rejoinder silenced Blanche. Daalgaard considered a moment, and then went on:—

“Whether I took it well or badly, I accepted it—I hope in a fairly reasonable manner.”

He seemed not to hear Blanche’s murmured reply; he said in a low, deliberate tone:—

"But there is one humiliation I won't submit to—feminine caprice. I see no reason why I should put up with that—none."

In the silence that followed he got up and walked to the fire-place; he put one arm along the mantelpiece and gazed into the fire. Watching him, Blanche began a great many phrases and rejected them all. At last she said in her gentlest, most distinct tone :—

"Captain Daalgaard, you have said enough to convince me of what I already knew, I think—that your position here is a difficult one." He remained silent, and she added :—"But as we are speaking so freely, I must remind you that the circumstances in which you find yourself are partly of your own making."

"Yes, I suppose so. You mean, that I should have refused to come here?"

"No—I mean that you created some of your problems before you came." He gave her a puzzled glance and she continued :—"I do not presume to criticise—but I must say this. It is your relationship with your—with Mme de Freysac that places you—wrongly—here."

"My relationship with Zoë? I don't understand."

"You mentioned feminine caprice—did you not submit yourself to it before you set foot in this place?"

"From my cousin? Did I? I wasn't aware of it—" said Daalgaard with a blank look. "She—"

"O! I know she has been of great service to you. But she—it is very difficult to speak of these things and to me, very distasteful. But isn't it, to say the least, a little unreasonable, to complain of the caprice of someone who—with whom you have associated yourself so completely?"

In the interval that followed Daalgaard's mystified look gave way to one of comprehension ; he stared at Blanche ; then the corners of his mouth twitched : his eyes gleamed. Deeply offended at his amusement, she gazed back at him severely. At last he said in a deliberately expressionless voice :—

"Do you think I am in love with my cousin?"

"Naturally, I thought so."

"And that she is—or was—my mistress?"

Blanche crimsoned painfully ; she said with an effort :—"Yes."

The flash of laughter in Daalgaard's face sank and died. He gave Blanche another long look and turned his eyes above the mantel-

piece as if seeking a suggestion there. He muttered something that she could not hear. Then he said with extreme gentleness :—

“You are wrong, Mademoiselle. I am not Mme de Freysac’s lover. I have known her since I was a boy—as I grew up, I liked to think myself in love with her. Perhaps I was, for a little while. When I was nineteen, she did me the honour to—take me in hand, would I think be the correct expression. We lived together in Paris—at intervals—for six months. That was fifteen years ago. We parted friends, and have remained friends. I am grateful to her, and fond of her. That is our relationship as it now stands.”

He turned away again and began to walk up and down. For a moment, shrinkingly confused, Blanche expected him to make some joking reference to her tendency as a writer of romances ; but he said nothing and she tried to ignore the joyous excitement that was sweeping over her. At last she was able to stammer out an apology. He interrupted her with :—

“Please, Mademoiselle—it was quite a natural supposition and is shared, no doubt, by—by others. But however much you dislike her—and I know that you do—you must exonerate my cousin of caprice, at least, as far as I am concerned.”

Blanche murmured something inaudible ; she still thought he might be laughing at her ; she looked up to see him staring at the ceiling. Then he said, as if to himself :—

“No—it was not of Zoë’s caprice that I was complaining.” He turned to look at her again, and added :—“But why should I complain at all, and to you ? It is I who should apologise.”

“No,” said Blanche steadily, forcing herself to look at him, “We were talking at cross-purposes. I—it is kind of you not to be angry.” As he shook his head she went on :—“It is the Comtesse de Marécourt who—of whom you were speaking. I know she does not mean—she—” she broke off in confusion.

Charles Daalgaard looked suddenly grim and exhausted, as if the reminder of Oriana was altogether too much for him. To Blanche’s dismay he put his head between his hands. Then he said in a low tone :—

“How old is she ?”

“Eighteen.”

“She does not know what she is about—does she ?”

“I don’t quite understand.”

Daalgaard's set look softened a little ; it seemed as if to continue speaking of Oriana was to recall the gentleness with which he always spoke to her ; he said in a thoughtful voice :—

"She must have been a problem—when you were in Paris together."

"What do you mean ?" Blanche exclaimed.

"O ! I know I should not discuss her with you, Mademoiselle. But—well, there it is. What amuses her is—difficult—" he clenched his hands, so that the knuckles stood out, bony and white, in the faint sunshine—"for me." He paused and then continued in a less constrained manner :—"I know—she's young, and all our hearts must be broken for her. She doesn't think—why should she?—what any of it means. Eighteen—and with all the money in the world—she's never had a chance."

Again his look darkened, and Blanche guessed that he was thinking of Aymon. Still she felt herself unable to speak, and he went on in a more matter-of-fact way :—

"I won't say anything further—except that it would be, to put it at its lowest, extremely inconvenient for me to give up my work here—who else is likely to employ me, as I am now? If I can just stay till complete recovery, I need trouble you no more. I fell on my feet, you see—and at present I can't walk very far."

"Yes, I appreciate that," said Blanche hurriedly, "But—how can I make it clear to you?—you are as wrong as I was, a moment ago."

"Well?"

"Oriana—Mme de Marécourt—is not—she—well, you talked of her behaviour in Paris. She was very much admired, naturally. But indiscretion, except in trivial matters of convention and formality, is not one of her faults. I—I am very devoted to her, as I think you know, and—"

"And so you blind your eyes to her behaviour?"

"No, indeed I don't do that. But you are wrong—quite wrong—in accusing her of what you said. She is beautiful and knows it, and has not had the training one could have wished for her present position—but—" she finished defiantly, "I don't know, actually, of what you accuse her. She's—she has a very affectionate nature."

"I have not the least doubt of it—" replied Daalgaard with a cold smile ; he paused to meet Blanche's indignant look and said :—

"She is all that you say, of course—only we put it rather differently. The point is that she is driving me out of this place, and I have nowhere else to go. I can't live on my cousin, even if she—" he broke off and added in a lower tone, "Well—let us say no more. I dare say if I could sleep a little I should not be so confidential."

There was a long silence ; then Daalgaard said in a more ordinary voice :—"She seems to do most things that you tell her—cannot you make her understand that it's not very amusing to be treated as she treats me ?" Blanche looked distressed and he went on :—

"I have no intention of letting her have her way—you had better tell her that too, or I shall have to."

"Her way ?"

Daalgaard paused before he answered ; when he did it was in a detached, half-joking tone. "It's absurd—we talk of hearts being broken, as if they were made of porcelain, when in fact they're nothing but indiarubber."

"It is—she does not—O ! we should not be speaking like this ! Oriana is not a flirt, Captain Daalgaard. She is a savage, but not—not the other."

"No ? Perhaps it comes to the same thing."

"Please believe me—after all, I know her better than you."

Daalgaard was about to answer when the door was flung open and the subject of their colloquy burst into the room. For a moment she stood still, glancing from one to the other. Then she flung herself into a chair with a swirl of skirts and some display of ankle, exclaiming :—

"O ! I'm so cross !"

There was a pause. Then Blanche said :—"What has happened ? I thought you were to spend the day at Yssimbault."

Oriana began to strip off her gloves ; she tossed them on to the table before she replied :—

"M. de Marécourt is still there, I believe."

Daalgaard had got up as she came in ; now he murmured something inaudible and began to collect his papers.

"Don't go—" said Oriana carelessly, "I wish to speak to you." He remained standing opposite her, and she went on :—"That horrible Nevers glass ! Would you believe it—Papa told Aymon it was mine, if you please, and he insists on bringing it here. I declare it shan't go in any of my rooms—he knows I detest it."

"Are you talking of the *calvaire* in your boudoir?" Blanche enquired.

"Of course—hateful thing! I said, if I couldn't choose for myself, he could do what he liked—and there he is still, poking about among—"

"How did you get back?"

Oriana looked sheepish. "I found a boat and rowed myself over—I splashed my skirts a little—" she looked down at her striped velvet gown in affected preoccupation.

"Really!" Blanche exclaimed, "What will—"

"O! I don't care what anybody thinks—Aymon didn't believe I meant to come back without him. He *was* angry—he said that they—the glass figures, you know—were exquisitely choice." She giggled faintly.

"You had better change your dress, if it is wet," said Blanche severely.

"I shall have something to eat and then go for a ride—please ring the bell," said Oriana, jerking her head at Daalgaard.

All this time he had been left standing and ignored as if he had been a servant; as he walked over to the fire-place his look of austerity descended once more and did not lift when he again absorbed himself in his letters. Oriana gave him a brief sharp scrutiny. When the footman came she ordered cake and wine to be sent in to her and the new mare to be brought round in half an hour. Daalgaard said quietly :—

"Have you any commands for me, Madame?"

Oriana replied curtly :—"O! yes—I want one of the boys from Yssimbault to be given a place here, in the stables, or the garden. His name is Arnaud Doche—will you see to it?"

She spoke without looking at him; he stood still, as if waiting for another order. When she impatiently added :—"That's all—" he said gently :—

"May I suggest that Sabra is not yet ready for you? As you know, I have been trying her myself a little every day, and—"

"O! I can manage her—" Oriana interrupted in the same cool, indifferent tone, "I shall give her a sharp lesson if she—"

"I am sure you should not—" Blanche put in.

"Good heavens, what a piece of work you're making about the

creature ! I intend to ride her some time —why not now ? She was bought for me to ride.”

“She is not yet a suitable mount for you,” said Daalgaard in an unexpectedly firm manner, “Please allow me to countermand the order.”

Oriana glanced at him ; her eyes widened. Blanche saw her take in his altered appearance ; her look softened a little : then something in his expression seemed to irritate her further, and she replied sharply :—

“She was ridden by a lady before.”

Daalgaard said nothing for a moment ; he put his hand up to his head with the bewildered uncertain movement that Blanche had already observed. Then he said with an attempt at a smile :—

“So you were told, Madame. But—”

“What do you mean ?” Oriana struck in angrily, “You—” she stopped as the footman came in with her cake and wine : she dismissed him ; then pouring out a glassful with a hand that was rather unsteady, she went on :—

“You think I can’t control her—is that it ? Well, we shall see—I certainly intend to try.”

Daalgaard began meticulously to fit the edges of his papers together ; his fingers were shaking ; then he said very low :—

“Will you not be advised, Madame ? Not to risk yourself ?”

Oriana’s eyes flashed ; with an expression of triumphant malice she finished her glass of wine and poured out another. She took a cake and crumbled it nervously, lifting up one shoulder like a sulky child. She was plainly enjoying herself, above the deeper levels of discontent and frustration ; glancing sideways at Blanche, she said contemptuously :—

“I shall not be gone long—if I’m not back in an hour, you and Mademoiselle can come and look for the pieces.”

There was a pause. Something in the quality of Daalgaard’s silence struck Blanche as peculiar, and she looked up to see that he had become lividly pale. He was breathing fast. He moved towards Oriana and tried to speak. She shrank away from him.

It then became clear to Blanche that the combination of her pupil’s past and present moods and of his inability to deal with them had at last roused Daalgaard to an anger that he did not intend

to control. Still he said nothing ; he was staring murderously at Oriana ; she said in the same high-pitched insolent tone :—

“What’s the matter ? Don’t you know I always do what I want ?”

“That has nothing to do with me—thank God.”

“You—”

“I am, however, responsible for your husband’s stable.”

“How dare you speak to me like that—how dare you ?”

He was shaking from head to foot ; but he went on as if she had not spoken, in a harsh, breathless voice :—“If you intend to break the mare’s knees or ruin her mouth, do so, by all means—I can’t stop you.”

The silence that followed was a short one. Oriana glared at Daalgaard ; she seemed to be struggling for breath to abuse him. The glass of wine was still in her clenched fingers. She took a step forward, and threw it in his face.

CHAPTER 7 *The Black Mare*

IN one of her novels—*The Coronet and the Sword*—Miss Peverence had seen fit to describe a scene whose climax was achieved by a gesture similar to Oriana’s. She always considered her rendering of the incident a little weak, in that she had never been able to make up her mind as to what should be the outward effect on the victim and had therefore brought down the curtain at once, rather than risk the bathos of further description. In correcting the proofs of the book Blanche eliminated this picture of violence on the grounds of its having already been much used by other writers and had only reinserted it at the request of her publishers, who assured her that her readers could not have too much of that sort of thing. Now, faced with an unrehearsed performance of what she had begun to look on as a rite peculiar to romantic fiction, she found herself unable to assimilate the actuality with the preconceived vision. It was almost impossible to believe that it had really happened : and as she had followed her own instinct and Oriana’s command in hurrying from the room, Daalgaard’s behaviour was hidden from

her. He had remained in frozen silence, fumbling for his handkerchief ; he must have looked ridiculous, as people generally do whose faces are splashed and dirtied ; beyond that she knew nothing with which to correlate fact and imagination.

One point was clear. She would never again be so insensate as to conceive that to throw a glass of wine in another person's face could be the act of a sympathetic character : and she recalled with considerable annoyance that it was the hero of *The Coronet and the Sword* who had so betrayed the seemliness on which she prided herself as a writer.

She expressed her disapproval of Oriana's behaviour by an acid reprimand as soon as they had left the library. Then she retired to her own room to reflect on the deadlock which this possibly final provocation had caused. During these first moments it did not occur to her that the excitement of reconstructing the scene and its consequences was entirely pleasurable ; she paced up and down, clasping and unclasping her hands and telling herself that Daalgaard was now in an even more impossible position than that he had indicated by his criticism of Oriana.

She returned to the library. Daalgaard was not there. She saw the black mare brought round and Oriana mount and go down the avenue, a groom riding behind her. In an hour it would be dinner-time : and she returned to her rooms. When she had dined she looked out of the window and saw, with a disappointment she was unable to ignore, Daalgaard's tall figure moving slowly down the terraces. Her immediate conclusion was that he had gone to the farm-house ; then she remembered his telling her that he was going to visit some cottages in need of repair a mile from the Villa. It was almost certain that he would pursue his duties as usual ; should Oriana come to hear of his movements during the afternoon they would show an unconcern which a visit to Zoë de Freysac might weaken.

As the hours wore on Blanche's censure of her pupil changed to pity, then to concern and finally to an anxiety that became unbearable as she began to visualise the mood that must succeed the girl's fit of passion ; she did not doubt that an extreme of anger would end in an extreme of misery. Oriana was capable of anything, from the rash to the irremediable. At last, just as Blanche was about to send for Daalgaard for help and advice, the individual

whom she found it increasingly difficult to place in the hierarchy of her circle appeared, like a minor character in a melodrama. The Comte de Marécourt had returned from Yssimbault and requested Mademoiselle's presence in the library.

Aymon had come home in radiant spirits ; his wife's defection had been but a momentary setback to his enjoyment of the day. He now gave Blanche the lists of his new possessions to copy : she was then to make a tour of the Villa with him, while he drew up a plan for the disposal of the new pieces. He brushed aside her anxiety for Oriana.

"O ! she will do these things, you know. If she has difficulty with the mare, it will be a lesson she needs. Now, as to the Clouet, I thought—but you had better finish copying the lists before we begin our rounds."

The fact that Oriana had been absent nearly four hours seemed not to disturb him ; and another passed before he and Blanche were near completing their task. He would not for a moment consider sending to look for his wife : she might be anywhere : and he himself was in fact due to meet Daalgaard, and must leave immediately. Aymon's real destination was clearly indicated by the look of complacency tinged with defiance that Blanche had observed on other occasions. Suddenly he seemed to be on the point of explaining himself. He cleared his throat, looked up and down and said in a casual tone :—

"By the way—does Daalgaard ever mention his cousin ?"

Blanche suppressed the memory of her last conversation with Daalgaard, and replied coldly in the negative. Aymon's face cleared, and he said lightly :—

"I merely ask, because she seems afraid that she has offended him in some way or other. She—ah—looks on him as a friend, you understand, and—well, it's difficult to say these things. Upon my word, I hardly know how to put it to you."

Blanche remained silent and severe ; but for once Aymon was not on the look-out for censure or approval ; he continued with a pleased and consequential expression :—

"I should consider myself very much to blame if I were to—frighten away, shall we say ?—one of Mme de Freysac's oldest friends. Daalgaard is in the position almost of a brother to her, and—"

"It seems to me singular, if that is so, that he should not have appeared in this neighbourhood until now—" Blanche put in.

Aymon looked sharply at her, began a sentence, and finally in a series of halting phrases gave her to understand that Mme de Freysac's gesture of hospitality towards Daalgaard had been the result of her breach with the Duc de Roncesvaulx. They had quarrelled over the Villa ; although it was not and never had been his to give, she had begged him to negotiate for her with Desmarests before it was too late and the young couple took possession ; but he refused to interfere, and she had established Daalgaard in her house in the character of a rival. All this information merely led up to the fact that Aymon's supremacy had caused Daalgaard's departure from the farm-house. "I declare—" Aymon concluded—"that if you had not hurried on our marriage—don't start, Mademoiselle, you see I know all about it—she might have had her way. Between ourselves, that would not have suited me half so well as the present position."

Blanche looked but did not express her disgust, and conscious of an increasing chill in the atmosphere, Aymon withdrew.

Blanche did not spend much thought on the realisation that Alfred Marchant had been right on this point as on several others, and that she was indirectly responsible for Daalgaard's presence at Marécourt. For a moment or two it did indeed seem as if he were a projection of her own fancy ; it was so that she often introduced her heroes, late and unexpectedly in the story : for she now saw Daalgaard in this principal role and Oriana as a (temporarily) tragic heroine.

By this time more than five hours had passed since Oriana's departure, and the anxiety which had been momentarily dissipated by Aymon's confidences returned in all its strength. Blanche began to walk up and down under the portico of the Villa, hoping to see the riders return by the route they had come. Presently this solitary watching became unendurable, and she sent a footman to see if Captain Daalgaard had returned. It would soon be dusk ; she wanted to send out a search party at once.

When Daalgaard joined her to hear that Oriana was still absent his impassivity took on the quality of a mask ; he seemed to reject his first comment, and they were both silent for a minute or two. Then he asked if Blanche had noticed which of the grooms was riding with her.

"I think—I am not sure—one of the young ones. I don't know them all by sight."

"What time is it now?"

"Nearly seven."

Again he seemed to consider; then he said slowly:—"In half an hour I will give orders for a search-party. I think we should give her so much longer."

Blanche agreed, and then added:—"It is wicked and cruel of her to behave like this."

There was another pause; then he said thoughtfully:—"She was very angry."

"Captain Daalgaard, I can make no excuses—her behaviour was—was that of a savage. But—"

"Spoilt children do sometimes behave like savages."

His cool tone was somehow galling; she replied vehemently:—"She is spoilt and undisciplined—but she is no longer a child. You are at fault in judging her as you do."

Daalgaard gazed at her for a moment before he answered. Then he said with the hint of a smile in his voice:—"Are you trying to tell me that Mme de Marécourt had a genuine grievance of which I was unaware?"

"No—yes! What am I saying? Cannot you see what she—are you blind?"

He gave her another long odd look; then he thrust his hands in his pockets and walked away, his eyes on the ground. He seemed to be phrasing his reply with some care; he came slowly back again, and said deliberately:

"I don't think I am blind, Mademoiselle." He waited for a moment and then went on:—"Shall we say that I see things from another point of view—my own? You on the other hand are an extremely loyal friend."

"That is very kind," said Blanche in a trembling voice, "but I should be a poor friend if I let her pass as entirely frivolous and selfish. She was both—she has changed."

"Has marriage done so much for her, then?"

"Please don't take that tone, Captain Daalgaard. You make a joke of everything. I ask you to believe—" she stopped, suddenly aghast at what she was saying. She was aware of Daalgaard's half-enquiring, half-serious look and found it exceedingly irksome; at

last she blurted out :—"I knew her before you did. I know that all her life she has found no one to love her—not even her father. Her disposition is not deep, perhaps—but it is loving and sincere."

In the pause that followed she saw that his expression had changed ; it was suddenly grave ; he seemed to look at her in surprise and disapproval.

"Do you know what you are saying ?" he said in a low voice.

"All I mean is—I cannot see Oriana traduced."

"Traduced ?"

"She is incapable of the falsity, the calculation of which you suspect her. She is violent and headstrong and—and neglected—but she is not and never will be a flirt—horrible word !"

"It was not I who used it, Mademoiselle."

"No—but you spoke of feminine caprice, and of her wanting to break hearts as a kind of pastime. Nothing—nothing—could be further from her real nature."

He stared at her as if he could hardly believe what he heard; his look was one almost of dismay. Blanche gazed back defiantly, and his eyelids dropped. He said quietly :—

"I understand you, Mademoiselle. I have no right to criticise or to complain of my employer's wife. I ask her pardon, and yours."

Still she could not be sure if she had convinced him or of what he was thinking ; his manner was characteristically gentle and cold, and this was somehow disappointing ; she had expected something more, though she could not tell what. It struck her as ludicrous that he should be the one to apologise, and she was beginning to say so, when he stepped forward and peered down the avenue. It was getting darker and there was a hint of rain in the air.

Then she heard the sound for which she had been forgetting to listen, and saw Oriana and the groom cantering towards them. Daalgaard's face was turned away from her ; she saw the muscles of his cheek twitch as he watched the approaching figures.

Blanche's annoyance with her pupil returned as she saw that whatever else she had been doing, she had not spent the last five hours in the saddle. Both horses were quite fresh, and the mare particularly lively ; she curvetted and sidled and appeared ready for mischief. Oriana's seat was pliant and easy ; but Aymon had once told Blanche that her hands were heavy, and certainly Sabra

seemed to find them unsympathetic ; she tossed her head and swerved, and Oriana's whip dropped on to the gravel.

The young groom bent to pick it up, backing his horse meanwhile. This agitated Sabra still further ; she gave one look, almost human in its feigned and wicked distaste, at the two figures in the portico, and made another swerve, as if to carry her rider round the corner.

Oriana seemed unperturbed, although she was rather flushed. She called out something to Daalgaard, who came forward. This was too much for the mare ; she reared, gave a sound between a snort and a whinny and made straight for the steps.

In recalling those few seconds, Blanche had the impression that Sabra's intention was to dash herself and her rider against the portico ; she was quite out of control and thoroughly enjoying herself. As she reached the first step, Daalgaard was at her head, his hands on her bridle. She reared again, dragging him up with her. What happened then was difficult to follow.

Oriana was half out of the saddle. The groom had dismounted and was running towards her. Daalgaard hung from the bridle. Between one second and the next this scene had dissolved into another.

Now the groom had hold of the reins, Oriana had dismounted and Daalgaard was thrown backwards on to the gravel. He raised himself, and fell again. The mare was forced back by the groom and two footmen were running out to meet him. In the shouting and confusion Blanche was aware of Oriana bending over Daalgaard and of the other horses standing at a distance. Then the noises died away and she too was kneeling on the gravel.

Daalgaard's eyes opened and he made a movement to rise. She heard him mutter something, and then he fainted ; his face was yellow and damp. Oriana tried to lift him. She was repeating "Is he dead ? Is he dead ?" in a monotonous whisper.

"Of course he's not dead," Blanche said sharply ; and as the girl leant forward and loosened his coat she pulled her hand away.

Oriana looked up with a bewildered stare. Now the footmen and the old major-domo were standing behind them. Blanche stood back and they lifted Daalgaard's long limp figure and carried him indoors.

Oriana plunged after them ; Blanche made a snatch at her arm,

and gripping it, said in a fierce urgent whisper :—“Don’t be foolish ! I’ll look after him.”

Oriana gazed stupidly at Blanche and repeated her question, and this time the older woman could only shake her head in reply ; still holding the girl’s arm, she turned to the groom and told him to ride into the village for a doctor ; then, half lifting, half dragging Oriana along with her, she went into the hall of the Villa.

They had laid Daalgaard on a bench and were gazing at him, shaking their heads and muttering to one another ; dimly aware of Oriana’s clinging weight, Blanche shook her off and put her hand on his forehead ; it was icy and dripping.

“He can’t stay here,” she exclaimed. “Pull down one of those curtains and make a stretcher. You must carry him to the nearest room—but upstairs—quickly.”

She said this with some idea that Aymon might come and find them before she had her explanation ready. As they lifted Daalgaard Blanche hurried back to Oriana ; she had hidden her face in her hands.

“He is not seriously hurt—do you hear me ?” said Blanche in the same violent whisper ; as the girl remained shivering and speechless, she continued :—“Go upstairs and tell them to light the fire—he must be kept warm—do you understand ?”

Oriana nodded and Blanche began to mount the stairs behind the improvised stretcher. Daalgaard’s own room was in fact the nearest, and he was put on the high four-poster just as he was, and covered up. He roused himself once to be violently sick, and then collapsed again.

Blanche’s mind was working quickly now. She decided not to risk shifting Daalgaard’s position more than was absolutely necessary. He shivered and groaned, opened his eyes and shut them again ; the crackling of the newly lit fire seemed to puzzle him ; Blanche bent over him, and said quietly :—

“You are in your own room. I am going to stay with you.”

This seemed to satisfy him, and he shut his eyes. There was a knock at the door, and the old major-domo put his head in. “Do you want anything more, Mademoiselle ?”

“No,” said Blanche in a low voice. “We can do nothing until the doctor comes. No one else is to come in—no one at all—do you understand ?”

As the door shut Blanche bent again over Daalgaard, who seemed to be trying to say something. "What is it? Do you want anything?"

He said indistinctly :—"Is she—what happened?"

"No one is hurt. Oriana has gone to change her dress."

He looked at her dimly and frowned; then he sank again into silence and oblivion. Blanche sat down by the bedside. Once she got up to tend the fire and once to lower the lamp. Daalgaard did not move or open his eyes. Twenty minutes later the doctor arrived.

Dr Dupuy was a young man with a dark, intelligent face, not at all the type of country practitioner that Blanche had expected to see in such a neighbourhood. She learnt afterwards that he had studied in Vienna and Paris and had taken up his residence at Marécourt for reasons of health. After a short discussion Blanche went to fetch Aymon's valet, an elderly man who had been long in the family. She then composed herself to wait outside while they undressed Daalgaard, preparatory to examining his injuries. But very soon the sounds from the bedroom sent her to the end of the passage where Oriana burst out of her room and flung herself sobbing into Blanche's arms.

Alarmed for her reputation, Blanche tried to reassure her. At last she cajoled and persuaded Oriana into composure by promising her that they would interview Dr Dupuy together as soon as he left his patient, and that, with his permission, she should presently see for herself that Daalgaard was not mortally injured. Blanche went on to point out that Oriana would be fit for neither interview if she did not pull herself together; if her husband were to return and see her in this state, he would begin by sending both herself and Oriana to Provence and go on by dismissing his steward as soon as he was well enough to leave. Privately Blanche considered Aymon incapable of so definite a course; but Oriana was sufficiently agitated to believe whatever she was told, and in a few minutes she had achieved some measure of calm. Blanche told her to go and change her dress, adding that they would await the doctor together in the long gallery.

His verdict was clearly given and caused a revulsion of feeling for which Blanche was extremely thankful. All this time—and hours rather than minutes seemed to have passed since she had left Daalgaard's bedside—she had told Oriana what she herself found it hard to believe; she had anticipated some serious injury to the

spine and a reopening of the old wounds. Now she heard that some muscles had been torn and the spine jarred ; the resultant shock and pain were enough to account for the fainting and nausea. There was nothing to fear ; but for at least a week the patient must remain on his back, strapped and bandaged, to give the injuries a chance to mend. Dr Dupuy proposed sending for two nursing Sisters from the convent near the village ; they would bring with them his prescriptions and all the sickroom impedimenta that were needed. In the meantime Blanche should take charge ; he made it clear that she ought not to have substituted the valet's assistance for her own during the ordeal which had just been endured ; delicacy was out of place where feminine skill and gentleness were called for : his patient must not for a moment be subjected to the rough and clumsy attentions of a servant. "You have some knowledge of sick-nursing ?" the doctor added sharply. Blanche replied that she had looked after her father during a long illness, and he nodded. Then increasingly conscious of Oriana's pleading gaze, she put in :—

"Would it be possible for him to see Mme de Marécourt for a few moments ? He seemed in some confusion as to what had really taken place, and I found it difficult to convince him of her safety."

"Certainly you may see him for a moment, Madame," said Dr Dupuy, eyeing Oriana admiringly. "He has been and will be in considerable pain—but I have just given him a soothing draught, so he should soon sleep a little—" and after a few further instructions he took his leave.

Without speaking the two women walked the length of gallery and passage to Daalgaard's room. Signing to Oriana to wait, Blanche went in and bent over him ; he opened his eyes and smiled faintly. She dismissed the valet, telling him to summon his mistress ; then she moved over to the fire-place. '

The room was absolutely still ; the fire had sunk into a red and glowing heap ; through the warm silence she heard the door shut and the rustle of Oriana's dress : there was not another sound.

Blanche turned and looked back at the shaded light and the pillow'd sunken head, as though into a picture. One arm was lying outside the coverlet. Oriana glided forward and took the long fingers in both her small soft hands. She bent down, half smiling, her eyes bright with tears. Daalgaard looked up and tried to lift his head ; now her hair touched his cheek : she put his hand against her

lips, and so they remained for a little while in silence. Then Oriana drew back, and holding his hand against her breast, spoke under her breath : his murmured response was lost as she bent over him again.

There was no need for Blanche to reconstruct those conjectured phrases of declaration and avowal. She had manipulated them in scenes of climax too often and too painstakingly to doubt them now. She turned and went out of the room.

CHAPTER 8 *Further Information*

WHEN the doctor returned with the Sisters there was time for Blanche to give him further details of the accident. He had attended Daalgaard during his last relapse and was able now to reassure her as to the state of the wounds received at Als ; he had re-examined them, and provided extra care was taken in the matter of bedsores, ten days or a fortnight in one position would not inflame those old scars. "He seems altogether in rather poor condition," the young man added, severely looking at Blanche, "No doubt the rest will benefit him in more ways than one."

So the routine was established and Daalgaard's rooms set out as if in preparation for a long illness. Aymon returned to find that portion of his house transformed, and did not conceal his annoyance at the deprivation of his steward's services. He frowned and tapped his foot while Blanche gave him an account of what had happened ; he interrupted her in the middle of a sentence.

"What is this about the mare ? Had not Mme de Marécourt been told that she was unreliable ?"

Blanche began to excuse Oriana, but he struck in with an exasperated gesture. "It's intolerable ! How am I to—O ! there you are—" as his wife appeared in the doorway—"This is a pretty state of affairs—what have you to say ?"

Oriana was remarkably composed ; she looked at her husband as if from a long way off ; she seemed unable to concentrate on what he was saying, and he angrily repeated his question. Blanche hastily pointed out that no serious harm had been done, and that Daalgaard would be restored to health in less than a fortnight.

"A fortnight!" Avmon repeated with a disagreeable, almost a mimicking intonation; he turned on Oriana and Blanche left them together.

On her way to bed she went in for a last look at Daalgaard, telling herself that the Sisters might be in need of some help. One, a neat tiny creature, was seated by the fireside and the other was moving about in the dressing-room. Daalgaard was asleep; the drug had taken effect, and he did not move or open his eyes while Blanche stood talking in a whisper with the nun. She reached her room in a state of exhaustion, and slept dreamlessly for many hours.

She woke with a start as if a hand had dropped on her shoulder. She drew the bed-curtains and looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was just six. Suddenly it seemed impossible to go on lying quietly there, and she got out of bed and went to the window. She saw a treacherously bright morning, the kind that presaged rain and wind later in the day; now there was a cool clearness in the atmosphere that reminded her of the sea: and she decided to dress quickly and walk along the shore. As she moved quietly about the room, shivering a little, she tried to avoid all thought of what had taken place during the last twenty-four hours.

She did not trouble to put on bonnet or gloves; she wrapped herself in a long woollen cloak and put a scarf over her hastily braided hair. As she went by Daalgaard's rooms she paused to listen; this was the hour when sick people fell asleep after pain, the hour when dreams identified themselves with the dreamer's surroundings; she could guess what Daalgaard's last waking picture had been: she hurried past his door. Half an hour later she was walking below the path where she had first seen him.

She looked across the waves and saw them enfolding the Castle rock in great rolling hills and valleys of steely mauve, tipped with transparent green and white; and as she looked again and counted the windows till she came to one that had been her own, she wished herself back in that enclosed and ordered monotony.

The remembrance of Oriana's face as she came in and listened to her husband's railing imposed itself on everything else; it had been neither radiant nor transported nor shrinkingly tearful, but supremely calm and remote, as if she were already in another world. Blanche had seen that look before, but never on the face of a young girl. Oriana had had five minutes alone with Daalgaard; those

five minutes had sufficed to alter her whole expression and bearing. She was now associated in the Englishwoman's mind with Gertrude Carey, of *The Coronet and the Sword*; there seemed as little difference between achieving the destiny of the one as of the other. (The elimination of Gertrude's elderly and unsympathetic husband had been a matter of constructive ability; it was neither forced nor melodramatic, according to one critic, but "inevitable and fitting".)

These then must be the adjectives that should apply to Oriana's happy ending; how it was to come about Blanche was not prepared to conjecture. Something—or someone—would show her the way.

The shock of the accident had destroyed Blanche's sentimental feeling for Charles Daalgaard. As she recalled the physical aspects of his collapse, she ceased, once and for all, to see herself behind the mask of another woman's youth and beauty. Sitting by his bedside and waiting for the doctor, it had occurred to her that she might have to nurse him; her immediate distaste at the thought was enough to show her that she was not and had never been seriously in love with him. His gentle manners and melancholy good looks had had their effect for a little while; now, although he was still handsome and amiable, helplessness and suffering removed him from her heart. Her concern for Oriana was paramount; she gave one more glance at her heroine's first setting and turned to go home; she was hungry, and her feet and hands were very cold.

As Blanche reached the terrace entrance to the Villa a footman hurried out to meet her. Mme de Freysac was in the drawing-room and wished to speak to her.

Blanche's first instinct was to refuse; curiosity urged her into the drawing-room almost before she had time to consider. Zoë de Freysac was standing by the window; as Blanche came in she faced her and said abruptly:—

"Tell me the worst, if you please. Is he going to die?"

For a moment Blanche contemplated the woman whom she felt to be more than ever an adversary and a menace. Mme de Freysac was as elegantly neat as usual; but her eyes had bruised lines beneath them, and her delicate sallow face was deadly pale. She spoke with the calmness of extreme tension.

"Who has told you that he is going to die, Madame? He is not seriously injured—he will be about again in a fortnight, or less."

Zoë de Freysac buried her face in her hands. She muttered something that Blanche could not catch ; for a moment she seemed unable to speak ; then she raised her head and said in an exhausted voice :—“I am so thankful—so relieved !” The tears brimmed over and ran down her cheeks ; she did not attempt to wipe them away. Blanche looked at her severely.

“I don’t know who told you such a thing,” she said, “but it is quite untrue. I am afraid it is not possible for you to see him at this moment, but—”

“See him ? Here ? Don’t be alarmed, Mademoiselle. I came to hear how he was. I should not attempt anything else, while you are in charge.”

“I am not nursing Captain Daalgaard,” Blanche replied coldly, “Two Sisters from the convent were sent for last night.”

“Two ? Then he is quite helpless ?”

“If you will sit down, I will tell you what the doctor told me,” said Blanche stiffly ; she was as unwilling as ever to do Zoë de Freysac a favour ; surprise was driving her on.

“That is kind of you. Please tell me everything.”

When Blanche had finished there was a short silence. Mme de Freysac had sunk into a chair ; now she got up and began to draw on her gloves with trembling fingers.

“Thank you—” she said in a low voice, “I have been horribly anxious. I should not have troubled you—but there was no one else I could ask, as M. de Marécourt objects to my coming here. I went to Dupuy’s house first, but he had already gone out. I will go now—thank you, Mademoiselle.”

She walked quickly to the door ; then she turned, and said with the satirical lightness of tone that always irritated Blanche :—“You see how formidable you have become. If I had not heard that my cousin was dying I should not have dared to approach you.”

She paused, and glanced round the room ; her expression changed from subdued malice to dislike and annoyance, as if the sight of Blanche, installed in the coloured and gilded setting she had so long desired for herself, was too much for her equanimity. She said slowly :—

“It was like you to get him into this house—you are a determined woman, are you not ? Poor Charles, he’s hopelessly weak where patronage is concerned. I told him he would find it difficult to leave.”

Blanche made no answer to this speech ; now Mme de Freysac appeared smiling and calm ; she was re-tying the strings of her bonnet with apparent unconcern ; as she looked at her Blanche felt the painful colour rise and burn her cheeks and neck ; she forced herself to say steadily :—

“You mean, I suppose, to insult me. Why can’t you leave me alone ? I should have refused to see you.”

“Ah ! but you could not resist it, could you ? Just as I cannot resist telling you that you are wasting your time. He will never marry you—he’s not the kind that marries out of gratitude.”

The last words were spoken with quiet malevolence ; in the pause that followed Mme de Freysac gave her speechless victim a keen cool look ; then she turned and went out of the room.

Blanche did not waste much time considering the affront to her dignity ; she wondered at herself for so exposing it : but that was unimportant compared with the knowledge of Zoë de Freysac’s love for Daalgaard, which now seemed fated to turn back upon itself. It was not surprising ; what seemed to Blanche incomprehensible was that she rather than Oriana should be the object of this dangerous woman’s jealousy, the more especially in that Mme de Roncesvaulx (whose confidence Zoë was supposed to share) had, on several occasions, surprised Oriana with Daalgaard. Neither Blanche’s chaperonage nor the young man’s reserve were likely to blind the old lady’s observation of her daughter-in-law.

Then suddenly it occurred to Blanche that Aymon de Marécourt must have seen and described her friendship with Daalgaard as the beginning of a connection that might end in marriage. According to his standards they were of a suitable age and position for such a match ; and she could almost hear him proclaiming his beneficent attitude towards this little romance in his household. If he had ever discussed it with his wife, commonsense (of which she had enough, though not much to spare) would have made her encourage his suppositions.

Blanche returned to her rooms, changed her dress, and drank her coffee. Then she sent a message to ask if she might see her pupil ; she did not even wait to enquire for Daalgaard, but followed on the heels of the messenger, and a moment or two later was standing at the foot of Oriana’s bed.

Oriana was sitting up, an untouched tray at her elbow. She looked

queerly at Blanche ; there was the faintest return of her mischievous expression as she contemplated the older woman's troubled face ; then she lifted the tray on to her knees and said briefly :—

“Well ? What did you want to see me about ?”

“I think you must know—” Blanche gravely replied. The look she gave Oriana was affectionate and pleading.

The girl poured out her chocolate with a steady hand ; she sipped it : then she put down the cup and pushed the hair off her forehead. Her ribboned nightcap had been cast to the bottom of the bed ; this was the only sign of disorder in her surroundings.

“You want to know about—Captain Daalgaard—and me ?”

She pronounced the name without a tremor and with an odd, cool deliberation ; whatever her situation, she had mastered it within the last twelve hours. As she looked at her and nodded dumbly, Blanche could hardly believe that this unsaltering gaze and level voice belonged to the creature of the day before or any of the days of their acquaintance. She waited ; presently Oriana said slowly :—

“He is in love with me.”

It was characteristic of Oriana that she should so proclaim the situation without troubling to dwell on her own feelings ; plainly her assumption was that her friend had been aware of them since the beginning. She had forced the issue : there was nothing to add, it seemed.

Blanche paused and then said in her gentlest manner :—“I know that. I guessed it some time ago. What are you going to do ?”

Oriana opened her eyes. “Do ? Why should we do anything ?”

The use of the plural gave Blanche a pang ; she flushed and said awkwardly, as if she had been forced to mention something incongruous and unseemly :—“I mean—your husband—” she hesitated again, and then added :—“I don't know what is in your mind. But before long he is bound to find out what has happened.”

“Nothing *has* happened yet,” replied Oriana, taking up a roll and breaking it into two pieces. Her tone was measured and cold.

Suddenly Blanche felt panic behind the words, a panic which she must share. She said quickly :—

“It is my duty—not a pleasant one, believe me—to remind you that you are not free. You are married—have you thought of that since—since yesterday evening ?”

Oriana finished her roll and wiped her mouth ; she lifted the tray to one side : then she settled herself back on the pillows and replied :—

“I know that you must have.”

“Please answer my question.”

Oriana smiled ; she said :—“I have only thought of one thing—since yesterday evening.”

“And that is ?”

“I can never really be unhappy again—never. Whatever happens—if he or I were to die to-day—I should have had this. Nothing else matters.”

“You mean, no one else matters. I think you will find that your husband does.”

“Aymon ? Why should it concern him ?”

“My dear child !” Blanche exclaimed, “You seem set on ignoring—” she broke off in considerable annoyance.

“What ?”

“That M. de Marécourt is your husband. You are a married woman. Must I say it again ?”

Oriana sat up and clasped her hands round her knees ; her hair fell over her face and she shook it away. “He is not my husband—” she said, as if speaking to herself.

“Really, Oriana ! What do you mean ?” Blanche expostulated.

In the pause that followed Oriana seemed to descend from some remote region of fancy or contemplation ; she looked thoughtfully at Blanche, as if deciding how best to describe what she had been meditating ; then she said slowly :—

“I mean that he has never treated me as if I were his wife. He can’t—or perhaps he won’t. I don’t know—and it doesn’t matter.”

CHAPTER 9 *The Interview*

FOR two or three days Daalgaard was in considerable pain. Drugged into a heavy sleep for the first hours of the night, he woke in aching and helpless misery, falling into an exhausted

dose towards morning. He endured discomfort, sleeplessness, and suffering with steady composure : he made no demands and no complaints ; he seemed strangely indifferent to the improvement that began to make itself felt after the fifth day when his head could be slightly raised and the bandages loosened a little. The Sisters told Blanche that his fortitude was very remarkable ; they believed him to be a good and pious young man ; such gentleness and patience combined with resolution, could only be rooted in a deep and rare spirituality : and Blanche gravely agreed, reserving her judgement as to the inner cause of his apparent placidity.

She went in to see him twice a day ; at first she stayed for a few minutes only, and they spoke hardly at all ; then, as he suffered less and slept more, she perceived him gazing at her as if he wanted something that he could not put into words ; his face lit up when she happened to mention some incident in the daily routine : and all at once she became aware that he wished to be able to visualise Oriana's movements during the hours that he lay silently thinking about her ; and so she formed the habit of describing everything that went on in the house in so far as it related to her pupil.

On the sixth day she came in to find him shaved and propped up almost to a sitting position ; then she saw that he was altered, not as she had expected, but for the better ; he seemed younger and less grim, as if he were rested and at peace.

Still they said very little to one another ; he looked at the narcissi that she was arranging in a vase on the mantelpiece ; then his eye wandered to a bunch of violets on the table at the foot of his bed. Blanche did not remember having seen them before ; she guessed that Oriana had sent them in.

Blanche had not anticipated nor could she quite understand Oriana's attitude of withdrawal ; she spoke of Daalgaard naturally but without any particular concern or emotion. Such conduct was discreet to the point of indifference : yet her whole look and manner still made it clear that discretion had nothing to do with reserve.

Whatever discords and gulfs had lain between these two were now temporarily bridged ; it was impossible for Blanche to envisage their next meeting with dread or disapproval ; it must be moving and might be dramatic : she would do nothing to further it, however.

Nine days after the accident Daalgaard was able to sit up for an hour or two every afternoon in his own room ; soon he would

come downstairs. Blanche told Aymon and Oriana this news while they were at dinner. For a moment she thought she saw Oriana's face fall ; but this impression was too peculiar to be at once absorbed, and she turned to hear Aymon speaking.

"Excellent—what did the Sisters say?"

"They were very sorry to leave such a model patient—" replied Blanche with a smile.

"I can imagine nothing more tedious than to be shut up with those two saintly women—can you?" Aymon pursued.

"I think he preferred them to the other sort of nurse—there were only orderlies at the hospitals he was in."

"Nuns don't count as women, naturally," said Aymon. "He must find the time pass very slowly now he is better. No doubt he thinks of Mlle Cathos' visit as the best part of the day—" he added, with a rallying look round the table.

"I have become part of the sickroom routine, I fear," said Blanche with a nervous laugh. "His best distraction will be to resume work as soon as he is fit for it."

Aymon did not appear to be listening ; he considered : then he turned to his wife.

"And you, Madame? As the person responsible for poor Daalgaard's misfortune, have you any suggestion to make for his convalescence?"

Oriana looked steadily at her husband. The censure in his tone seemed not to affect her ; but it was as if she recalled her actions and their consequences in a meditative and serious manner. While Blanche looked at her she could almost hear the recapitulation ; Oriana had tried alternative appeal and hauteur, then violence : at last she had taken a risk and almost before she knew it, the siege was over. She thought for a moment more : then she said gently :

"I am sorry he was hurt—I wish he had not suffered."

"It has not occurred to you, I suppose, to offer him an apology—or even thanks?" said Aymon with increasing severity. "He has sacrificed, apparently without a single complaint, at least a fortnight of useful and congenial employment for a whim—a detestable, tedious caprice. Gratitude is perhaps too much to ask—but you might at least have the grace to tell him that you are sorry for what you have done."

"I did—I did tell him."

"Indeed? When?"

"When it happened."

"While he was unconscious? That was considerate, indeed."

Oriana's eyes remained for a moment on her husband's angry face; the more composedly she replied the more irritated he became; now his annoyance seemed to confuse her: she said in a low voice:—

"I can tell him again—when he is better."

Aymon paused; his wife's confounded look, her embarrassment and Blanche's alarmed expression began to restore his complacency; he said in a magisterial tone:—

"That will not quite do, I am afraid. Daalgaard is no longer prostrate or in pain. You will have the goodness to visit him this afternoon. You can do no less. You ought, in fact, to have done it days ago."

Now Oriana seemed unable to raise her glance; she was gazing into her coffee-cup as if hoping to find an answer there; she said nothing, and Aymon went on:—

"Upon my word, I never expected to have to give you a lesson in manners."

"I don't know why—you've given me a great many—" said Oriana with a flash of disdainful mockery.

"Let me have no more excuses, please."

"I haven't made any."

"Enough!" exclaimed Aymon histrionically, striking his hand on the table. A coffee-spoon flew into the air; his cup and saucer clinked in sympathetic agitation. "I wish to hear no more until you can tell me that you have seen and apologised to Daalgaard. Good heavens! because he's an inferior, do you think he has no feelings, no sensibility? In our family we don't treat our servants as if they were machines. I insist—you hear me?—I *insist*—that you do your duty as my wife and mistress of this house."

Oriana had checked a spurt of laughter at her husband's opening gesture. As he continued to speak she became first contemptuous and then distressed. Blanche could not imagine why a young woman who had been capable of so much effrontery should now show a feminine shrinking; yet whatever else Oriana felt it was plain that to be ordered into Daalgaard's presence at this juncture was in the nature of an ordeal. She struggled to reply defiantly, and then stammered out:—

"May—can Blanche come with me?"

"Mademoiselle will no doubt chaperone you during this very dangerous interview," replied Aymon ironically. "That is for her to decide."

Oriana looked at Blanche imploringly and the older woman nodded. Aymon glanced triumphantly from one to the other and with a wave of the hand indicated a desire for their withdrawal. As soon as they were alone Blanche said abruptly :—

"Why don't you want to see him?"

Oriana walked over to the window ; she put one hand on the long damask curtain and leant her head against it. "There'll be a storm before dark," she said absently, "I can see the lightning over the forest." Then she added :—"I've thought about seeing him so much that I'm afraid—"

"Afraid ?"

"Yes—that everything will be different. It must all change, you see." She turned and looked at Blanche, frowning a little. "We can't be as we were when we—when I last saw him. If we'd been people in a story it would have ended there—wouldn't it?"

Blanche considered. Since the moment of Oriana's revelation she had recast the grouping of her characters ; her mind had travelled as far as the annulment of Oriana's marriage and her ultimate union with Daalgaard. She had no idea how all this was to come about ; she simply knew that it was the right, the only course towards the happy ending. Aware of the iron fixity of the bond in this as in most marriages, she nevertheless regarded its dissolution as a moral necessity. Of all her father's ideals and principles, that of the freedom of choice in a life-partnership appealed to her most ; Oriana had been deprived of it, therefore her marriage was without sanctity as without obligation ; the privilege of maternity being also denied her, she must be helped towards the full enjoyment of her functions as a wife and mother over and round the obstacles of custom and tradition obtaining in her circle. It was a project that required a basic alteration in Oriana's attitude : and with this end in view, Blanche answered her question.

"The best stories generally end in something more permanent than a love-scene."

Oriana stared. "I thought you would be shocked—are you going to help me?"

Blanche looked steadily at her pupil. "I won't countenance an intrigue—that must be quite clear."

Oriana seemed rather confused; she murmured:—"O!—intrigue—" as if Blanche had said something tactless and crude.

There was a short silence. Oriana went over to the gilded mirror between the windows and began to rearrange her hair and dress; she was breathing fast and her hands shook a little. Then she turned and said in a low voice:—"Shall we go up now?"

As they walked along the passage together Blanche began to wonder if she should let Oriana go on alone. But the girl seemed to take her presence for granted, and, when they paused before knocking at the door, gave her friend a startled, nervously smiling glance. She pulled at Blanche's hand as Daalgaard's voice came from within; but Blanche disengaged herself and leaving the door ajar, went up to the fireplace where he was sitting in a high-backed chair, an open book on his knee. "Here is a new visitor for you—" she said, deprecating the artificiality of her tone.

As Daalgaard looked past her she saw him flush, a dull unbecoming red; he put one hand up to his hair, as if to stop the rise of burning colour. He said nothing.

Blanche drew back a little as Oriana came nearer; she looked down at Daalgaard with the possessive absorption that Blanche had noticed before; she put out her hand and touched the back of his chair. Then she said in an unnatural voice:—

"Are you—are you better to-day?"

"Yes—I am—" said Daalgaard, his eyes on her face.

"You'll be coming downstairs again—very soon?"

"Yes—very soon."

Oriana's hand dropped from the chair-back; she let it fall on his shoulder; he took it at once in his as if he could not bear her to touch him so lightly. Oriana seemed unable to speak for a moment; then she drew away, and sitting on a low stool in front of the hearth, said in a steadier tone:—

"You've been up here nine whole days—has it seemed long?"

Daalgaard's flush had faded, leaving him very pale. He shook his head without speaking. There was a long silence. Then Blanche said:—

"He has been most uncomplaining and obedient. The Sisters thought him a very good young man."

A reminder of Daalgaard's derisive look flickered over his face, so faintly that it was swallowed up almost at once in his unwavering, speechless gaze. He looked at Oriana as if she might at any moment disappear, as if he had been woken from a heavy and blinding sleep. His embittered and unwilling forbearance was over : he was free to look at her for as long as they were together. So Blanche seemed to read his expression, and when Oriana turned to her with a smile she took the hint and slipped from the room.

She was absent for a quarter of an hour and then came back rather timidly. Oriana was still sitting in front of the fire and Charles Daalgaard was leaning towards her : he sank back as Blanche came in and gave her a vague, indifferent glance. She had intended to stay and talk to him for a little while when Oriana left, but now she changed her mind. This was not the moment for the interview she had planned.

That moment came a good deal later than she could have wished, when his convalescence was nearly at an end. During this time Aymon and Oriana had their first house-party ; it consisted of two elderly spinster cousins from Provence, Baudoin and his betrothed, Stéphanie de Méré, a tall, high-shouldered girl of seventeen, with yellow hair and a flat rosy face. The Duchesse de Roncesvaulx now resumed her habit of dining every other evening at the Villa, with the result that Daalgaard retired to his own rooms and was hardly seen, except when Aymon desired his company.

The visit lasted ten days ; Oriana played her part moderately well ; her husband was too occupied in showing off his new possessions to notice her absences, which Blanche suspected were spent with Daalgaard. She herself was busy all day long.

Aymon invited the Caumonts and other neighbours to a series of dinner-parties at which Oriana was a silent hostess ; with those she had known since childhood, just as with strangers, she had no facility in expressing herself ; her knowledge of the antique might have been an asset, if she had been able to use it, but her husband, fearful for his own prestige, did not encourage the only topic in which she was likely to excel.

Although Oriana seemed pleased to see the last of her guests, Blanche had the impression that at intervals she delighted in the role of the young chatelaine whose beauty everyone, including her newly engaged brother-in-law, must admire : and she also knew,

from the allusions Oriana let fall, that she had become an adept at unobtrusive deception.

Soon after the departure of the guests Daalgaard began to cast off all the habits of invalidism. He almost lost his look of ill health. His gentle manner was unchanged, his expression generally impassive and withdrawn ; it almost seemed as if he were withholding himself for a talk with Blanche. At least, so she thought, until they found themselves alone one afternoon with no prospect of being interrupted for the next hour or so ; she was proportionately astonished to find him extremely reserved. At last she grew tired of angling and hinting ; she said abruptly :—

“Please allow me to speak frankly to you—may I ?”

“That generally means something disagreeable,” said Daalgaard with a smile, “But of course, Mademoiselle. I am all attention.”

They were in his study or office, as Aymon was pleased to call the small oblong room, furnished with bamboo chairs and tables and decorated in Carlo Mell's most fantastic style with palms and tropical creepers interspersed by mirrors let into the wall. It was a dark rainy day, and the luxuriant verdure of his surroundings threw a cold green light on Daalgaard's face and shoulders. He looked Nordic and icy, in spite of his faint amusement at Blanche's opening. She put down her needlework and began :—

“I want you to realise that I consider myself responsible for Oriana's happiness.”

There was a pause.

“I know you do—” said Daalgaard gently.

“May I assume, then,” went on Blanche, “that I have your confidence, as I have hers ?”

She got up as she spoke and took the chair opposite his on the other side of the table ; there was a green glass inkstand between them and several neat piles of ledgers and papers. Blanche never afterwards saw an inkstand of that particular colour and design without an accompanying recollection of the nervousness almost amounting to terror that seized her as she glanced at Daalgaard and then lowered her eyes ; she had gone too far to wait for his consent to her suggestion ; she drew a quick breath and said in a confused and rapid manner :—

“Whether I have or not, I am sure—at least, I believe—that you will not object to—that—”

"Please go on."

"If—if the circumstances were favourable—could you make her happy?"

Daalgaard leant back a little ; his expression was severe. She felt increasingly ashamed of her temerity ; only the consciousness that she was doing her duty enabled her to remain in the room. When at last he spoke he gave her the answer she least expected.

"I don't think you would have asked me such a question unless you had some plan in your head—will you tell me what it is?"

Blanche's first feeling was one of being cornered ; then came relief ; she had at least not been snubbed or reproved ; his look was still grave and cold, but not censorious. She clasped her hands together, and gazing down at them, said baldly :—

"Her marriage could be annulled. She is morally free. Did you know that?"

Now the answer came at once in a perfectly detached tone. "I know her circumstances. Her freedom, moral or otherwise, is another matter."

"You mean that I have no right to discuss it?"

"I don't know if you have any right to—I do know that you are raising a very complicated question."

"I am deeply conscious of that—I realise that her whole happiness is involved."

"And so you are asking me my intentions?"

She looked up to see him smiling a little ; encouraged, she replied rather tremulously :—"Yes—I suppose I am."

He gave her a brief, penetrating look and began to walk up and down ; for a moment or two she watched the tall figure in the shabby dark coat without speaking ; then nervousness compelled her to add :—"I know that what I am saying sounds like the worst kind of interference and presumption."

"Don't concern yourself for that, Mademoiselle. I think I know what you feel." He stopped to give her a more friendly glance and continued his pacing in silence. Then he said abruptly :—

"I am thirty-five. Mme de Marécourt is not yet nineteen. Are you treating her quite fairly in pinning me down like this?"

"What do you mean?" Blanche exclaimed ; it was as if a cold hand had been laid upon her chest ; she half rose from her chair and then sank back again as he went on :—

"I am trying to put her case to you, not my own. You know my circumstances. Have you considered hers?"

Bewildered by his stern and disapproving manner, Blanche murmured something unintelligible ; he continued, with a return to the tone in which she had generally heard him speak of Oriana :—

"She has a great position and a great name. You want her to throw it all away, as if she were the heroine of a romance. That's not so simple."

"Please don't bring romance into this, Captain Daalgaard. Though no one seems to believe it, I am capable of thinking in a practical manner."

As if he had not heard her he went over to the bookshelf at the other end of the room. He stared at the books with the same austere expression, and Blanche was thankful that no title of hers was there to meet his eye. He turned, and leaning back, his hands in his pockets, said deliberately :—

"She has been surrounded by luxury and riches all her life. Have you imagined her without them?"

"Have you?" said Blanche in a low voice.

He winced a little ; the flicker of emotion reassured her ; she said smoothly :—

"Oriana has not had the chance to prove herself adaptable—yet."

He looked round the glittering room with a return to the derisive bitterness she was beginning to dread ; he seemed determined to put up a barrier between them. She was surprised when he said in a much gentler tone :—

"It is difficult to imagine an entire life spent in a palace—or a museum. I don't know what I should call this place."

Emboldened by this change of manner, Blanche said with a rush :—"All the same, you must have pictured her in another setting—have you not?"

There was a pause. "I will leave those thoughts to your imagination—" replied Daalgaard, with a dryness that was not entirely repressive ; he was looking at the ground.

The conversation seemed to have come to a standstill. Blanche resolved to say no more until he did. She took up her netting again. Then she became aware that he had left the books and was sitting opposite her once more. She glanced up and saw that he was staring at the papers on the table ; he raised his eyes suddenly and they

looked at one another ; he took up a pen and balancing it between his long fingers, said rather grimly :—

“I find it hard to believe that a girl of eighteen can know what is best for her. Did you, when you were her age ?”

“Yes, I think I did.”

“And you believe that she does ?”

“I think her less worldly than you do.”

“Was that why you threw us together ?”

“Threw—”

“Yes—it was you who suggested I should come here—do you remember that ?”

“I do—but—”

“It was you who told me that she was serious—do you remember that also ?”

“Do you reproach me for it ?” Blanche exclaimed.

He looked at her for a moment without speaking ; then he said with a queer, despairing mockery :—“I think I should, you know.”

“I don’t understand you !”

“Nor I you, Mademoiselle. I never met anyone like you.”

“Please—”

“O ! I mean it—I never did. I wonder what would have happened if you had left us to ourselves.”

“Do you mean that you consider me responsible for—” Blanche broke off, appalled ; she stared at him, too horrified to protest further.

“You think me ungrateful and unchivalrous, do you not ?”

“I don’t know what to think. You have given me nothing to go on.”

Daalgaard’s eyelids dropped ; he said quietly :—

“No—I have not answered your first question. You have been very patient—but you took me by surprise.”

“How ?”

“I expected a lecture, warning me off—at least some good advice. You have offered me neither.”

“No. I keep my lectures for Oriana—” replied Blanche with a smile.

“I see—well. What do you want me to tell you ?”

“Only this. Whether you are as serious as I believe her to be.”

There was a long silence. Blanche did not venture to look up from her work, but her hands trembled too much to go on with it.

Daalgaard shifted a little ; from beneath her lowered eyelids she saw his hand carefully putting back the pen on the tray ; then he rose and walked over to the window ; now she felt able to look again at his gaunt, sharply cut features ; inscrutable, sombre, withdrawn, he seemed to look out over the wet, fluttering green of the park from a long way off. Against the light she saw his narrow blue-grey eyes bright and set, as if they held unshed tears. He said in a low voice :—

“You don’t ask a man in a delirium if he’s serious—how can I answer you ?”

“I—I think I understand.”

There was another long silence. Daalgaard turned from the window to scrutinise Blanche as if for the first time ; then he said with a recurrence of his ironic manner :—

“Yes—you should understand some part of what you have done.”

“What do you mean ?”

“You want your pupil to be an elevated, romantic character, instead of a spoiled child—well, she may become one. Will that make her happy ? I wonder.”

“You overrate—”

“It would be impossible to overrate your influence.”

“You speak as if Oriana had no mind and character of her own !”

“No. I believe she has proved herself adaptable—that’s all.”

“Have you had nothing to do with that ?”

He bent his head and began again to walk up and down. He had mastered his voice ; when next he spoke it was in his usual tone :—

“I have told myself a hundred times that it’s madness. But I’ve fallen in too deep to see anything clearly. She’s—she’s young enough to—”

“It appears to me that you see a great deal,” put in Blanche sharply.

“You mean, a great deal that isn’t there ? I don’t think so.” He paused and then continued meditatively :—“I think I know what would have happened if it had not been for your influence—I should have been a new experience, nothing more.”

“What a very unpleasant thing to say !”

"No—is it? Will you tell me something?"

"If I can."

"What are you doing to her? Why didn't you let her alone?"

"You have no right to—"

"Well—never mind. It's too late to think of that. Do you remember the first time you came to see me at the cottage? Perhaps I knew it then—I can't tell. I suppose one imagines the beginnings of these things."

"Do you distrust your own feelings?"

"No."

His tone was so cold and dry that Blanche was silenced; in the interval that followed she prepared herself for an attack; he took up the conversation in a mild, considering manner that was more baffling than irony or derision.

"Now you want her to give up everything—you realise that that is what it would mean?"

"I do."

"Suppose then that this marriage is annulled. I don't know M. Desmarests, but from what I've heard I can't imagine that he'll approve of his only daughter running away with a penniless foreigner."

"I hope that there will be no need for subterfuge, or—or—"

"You have it all planned out? Annulment—remarriage—, what then?"

There was considerable sharpness in his voice. Blanche was suddenly appeased; he had said enough for her to trust him; she realised what she had not thought of till this moment, his anomalous position, his lack of background and prosperity, not as disadvantages in the general situation, but as personally humiliating to him: he was indeed bound, while Oriana was free. He said:—

"The things that she cares about mean nothing to you."

"Do you mean fine clothes and luxurious surroundings?"

"Not only those. She enjoys her position as mistress of this place. She made that very clear when her brother-in-law and the cousins were here."

"Yes—in a way—but—"

"You see, Mademoiselle, a woman in your position can be independent. You make your own world, as you said the other day. She must accept the world that others have made."

"How can she be happy in it? She has nothing that really matters. Everything that surrounds her is trumpery and—and artificial."

"To you it is. To her, it may be natural—" he broke off, staring in front of him ; his face was worn and miserable, the lines round his mouth deeply accentuated ; he said in a low voice :—

"She is a prisoner—how can I set her free?"

"I think you will—" said Blanche, adding impulsively, "Captain Daalgaard, I don't discount the difficulties, I don't indeed."

"Perhaps not—but you see them from outside."

"Don't you ever picture to yourself a life when they will be behind you?"

He drew a long breath : he said in a stifled voice :—"That's not a fair question."

"Well, I have—and I think it will come sooner than you believe."

"Do you?" said Daalgaard with a strange harsh emphasis ; he walked over to the mantelpiece and stood looking down into the fire. Then he said almost inaudibly :—

"I must be besotted indeed—but sometimes I think so too."

There was a pause. "Well, then—" Blanche began, and stopped as he turned to face her ; he put his hands behind his back ; then, apparently controlling himself with an effort, he said in a rough, shaken voice :—

"Wait. Listen to me."

"I am listening."

"You—she's too young. You must give her a chance."

"Of course."

"Don't force her."

"Is that likely?"

"I think it extremely likely that you have no notion of what she would have to sacrifice."

"I'm not blind."

"No?"

Blanche looked but did not express her displeasure. Daalgaard contemplated her fixedly and then broke into a short laugh ; he put one hand along the mantelpiece, and she saw that it was trembling. Then he repeated in a firmer tone :—

"Don't force her. If you do, I—I'll—however, I seem to be talking like the hero of a bad novel. But I won't have it done—do you understand?"

"I understand. But I think there will be no question of forcing Oriana to do what she does not wish," Blanche replied.

He gave her a sardonic glance. She looked at him earnestly ; he turned to gaze into the sunken fire. They said no more to one another for a long time.

CHAPTER IO *The Traditional Attitude*

THE cousins from Provence had admired everything at the Villa except the swimming-bath, which was completed during the last days of their stay. Aymon's complacency was a little shaken by the older ladies' disapproval of the eccentricity that had combined with ostentation in producing it ; and Stéphanie's lowered gaze and shrinking confusion whenever it was mentioned disturbed him considerably. He did not explain it away as one of Oriana's caprices ; her passion for bathing had already been a subject of disagreement between them ; so his final defence lay in taking his brother aside to tell him that his father-in-law had overridden taste and judgement in this as in other matters.

Jean Desmarests would not in fact have approved of Oriana's new toy. His daughter's flair for the artificial and the elaborate had caused her to spend a quantity of money on a white Gothic pavilion (the Etruscan designs were rejected at the last moment) standing at the end of a lapis-lazuli bath whose waters were daily renewed from the stream that had already been diverted to run through the gardens. A row of dwarf cypresses backed the polished marble of the pavilion which contained a divan, a table, a hanging mirror and an apparatus for making coffee or chocolate ; its walls were hung with linen striped in broad bands of lilac, turquoise, eau-de-nil and vermillion.

The Comte de Marécourt was in fact perfectly satisfied with his wife's absorption in her schemes : he went so far as to encourage them. He remarked to Blanche that they seemed to have put Paris out of her head for the time being—or was she settling down at last?

This enquiry stirred Miss Peverence's sense of duty ; her plans for Oriana remained unchanged, but they did not include intrigue

or deceit. She gave Aymon a non-committal answer and then, as soon as she and Oriana were alone, brought up the question of her husband's attitude.

They had driven down to the shore and were walking along the sands. Oriana took Blanche's arm, exclaiming :—

"Do you mean that he is beginning to suspect something?"
Blanche shook her head.

"It would be odd if he did," the girl continued, "because you know he has told me several times that he thought you and Captain Daalgaard might get married one of these days."

"And you encouraged him to think so."

"Of course."

"Oriana, I cannot be a party to this deceit. It is wrong."

Oriana looked grave. "You want to go away from here?" she enquired.

"Not unless you wish it. I feel responsible—" Blanche broke off. This was not what she had meant to say.

"But what do you want? I don't understand."

There was a pause, while they continued to walk slowly onwards, their eyes on the ground.

"I desire your happiness above all else—" said Blanche at last.

"Well? I am happy."

"Do you ever think of the future?"

Oriana dropped her friend's arm and turned to look across the waves, glittering in the May sunshine, to the Castle. "How unhappy I was there—" she said absently: then her eyes wandered back to Blanche's anxious face. "Do you mean when I'm old? I don't expect I shall care about anything then."

"You will want to look back on a useful, well-spent life, surely?"

"You're always talking about my being useful, Blanche. I'm not clever, like you. I do want—" she paused, looking in front of her.

"What?"

"I would like to—to do things—for Charles. Does that sound silly?"

"Indeed it does not. What kind of things?"

"He's so poor, you see. Did you know he had only two suits of clothes?"

"No, I confess I did not," said Blanche, smiling.

"Of course, he never was rich, even before the war. But now

he has nothing except what he earns. I wonder if—what do you think?—could not Aymon give him more than he does?"

"I should advise you not to suggest it."

"No—but couldn't you?"

"My dear child, it's not my business —how could I interfere?"

"People nearly always do what you advise. Even my father did. And Aymon says you are very talented—he read one of your books the other day."

"Oriana, this is not what I wished to talk about. When I asked you if you ever thought of the future, I was thinking of the next few years. What do you mean to do?"

"Stay here, of course. I shan't want to go to Paris now."

"Don't you see—that that's impossible?"

"Why?"

"There are many reasons. It would not be fair to Captain Daalgaard, for one thing."

Oriana stared. "What do you mean?"

Blanche paused to frame her answer as succinctly as possible.

"He is in love with you—" she said slowly. "Do you think he will be able to live in the same house—or even in the same neighbourhood—without constant and severe temptation?"

They had stopped in their walk. Oriana's expression was serious and attentive; a moment later it occurred to Blanche that it had the same puzzled dismay she had once observed in Daalgaard's. When Oriana spoke her tone had changed also; it was a little reprobating.

"He has never said anything of that kind to me. He was unhappy before, because he did not believe that I was in love with him. Now—he knows I am. But you know all about that."

They walked on in silence for a few minutes, their heads bent against the breeze. Oriana shut her parasol and let it trail behind her. Blanche glanced at her and then said abruptly:—

"You mean that you are going to start an intrigue in your home—the home that you share with your husband?"

Oriana considered a moment; then she said mildly:—"You make it sound so complicated. If Aymon cared about me, it might be. But he's quite happy with Zoë."

"What you are saying is wicked and horrible—I suppose you realise that?"

"How can we talk about it if you are angry with me?"

"Angry? It's beyond anger. I'm shocked and disgusted—though half the time I believe you don't know what you are saying."

There was another long silence. Oriana sighed; then she said in a low voice:—

"Let us sit down on that breakwater. I want to tell you something." They had been seated for several moments before she began:—

"Blanche—have you ever loved anyone?"

"Not in the sense that you mean."

"But other people—girls like me—must have talked to you about the men they were in love with?"

"I know no other girls like you—" said Blanche with a slightly embarrassed smile.

"Don't you? That makes it more difficult. But you do like Charles much better than Aymon?"

"What has that got to do with—"'

"But you do—tell me."

"Yes—Captain Daalgaard and I have more in common, I think."

Oriana's eyes flashed with sudden laughter: she bit her lip and dug the point of her parasol into the sand. Then she said gravely:—

"Don't you think I have?"

"I dare say. But—"

"Wait. Haven't you seen how much nicer I've been since—since we knew about each other?"

"I never denied that you were suited."

"Well, then. Is it the question of Aymon that worries you?"

"I wish you had never been married to him."

Oriana sighed again; she looked rather timidly at her friend. "I wish I knew how to say it to you—" she said. "It was all clear in my mind just now."

Blanche looked curiously at her pupil. "Do you still go to confession?" she said curtly.

Oriana flushed. "Yes—why?"

"Then surely I need not tell you that you are in danger of mortal sin—they call it that in your Church too, don't they?"

"But we all of us sin all the time, Blanche—I don't remember a single week when—"

"This is more serious—you've been told so, haven't you?"

"Well—yes. But it has stopped such a lot of other sins, you see." As Blanche raised her eyebrows, Oriana continued, confused but determined:—"I'm happy now—and you've so often told me that happiness is the truest good. I'm not so greedy as I used to be—I don't think about my pleasures all the time. When Aymon said I couldn't bring my monkey—the griffon's dead, by the way, did I tell you?—over from Yssimbault, I never said a word."

In the pause that followed Blanche gazed speechless at Oriana. This mathematical morality was beyond her. The girl put her hand on her friend's knee, adding:—

"Do you remember that book you said I was not to read till I was married?"

"Which one?"

"Some memoirs—a German name—O! yes—de Seingalt. Well, I have read it, some of it, at least—it's very long."

"I don't see—"

"Do you remember the preface? It was written by a—an Academician, don't they call them?"

"Yes—but—"

"It's the first book I ever read that wasn't a novel. He explained about how they lived in Italy, all those years ago. The cicisbeo—do you remember?—the man who—"

"That was an absolutely corrupt society. It perished—as it deserved."

"I think it must have been a happy one—" said Oriana gently. There was a short silence.

"And you intend—" said Blanche, forcing her voice to steadiness—"to behave as those women did?"

"Well—not altogether. We live so quietly here—things are rather different in the country."

Blanche waited a moment; then she said:—"Oriana, I am older than you. I know the man you are in love with as perhaps you do not. Do you really see in him anything of the cicisbeo—the cavalier of a degenerate circle? Think of some of the men you met in Paris. Is he at all like them? Tell me."

"No—I suppose not—" said Oriana slowly.

"You want your love to last—don't you?"

"It will last."

"Not unless it is based on the right foundations."

"How can you say that? I shall always love him."

"You may. But men are different—they must respect where they love—otherwise—"

"Aymon's father must have respected Zoë—he was in love with her for eighteen and a half years—" Oriana interrupted, with rapid accuracy.

"Do you think he resembles Captain Daalgaard—in any way?"

"Perhaps not—what difference does that make?" replied Oriana in a defiant tone.

"What I am trying to point out is the different tradition that exists in France in regard to a woman in Mme de Freysac's position. In my country—and perhaps in Denmark too—we look on such relationships with horror and disgust."

"But that has nothing to do with us—we're not living in Denmark, or in England—" Oriana persisted, "And besides—Charles does not disapprove of his cousin—they are friends."

"Do you know all the facts—that she was once, long ago, his mistress?"

"Yes—he told me."

"Did he tell you how long their connection lasted?"

"Yes—a few months."

"Exactly—a few months. Now do you see what I mean?"

A long silence fell. Blanche was looking at the ground. She heard a gasping breath, and turned to see Oriana's eyes full of tears; for a moment or two there was a struggle against breaking down; then she buried her face in her hands. Blanche put an arm round her shoulders.

"Have I said too much? I didn't want to hurt you."

"It's not that!" ejaculated Oriana between her sobs, "—only—you make it so difficult—so muddling."

"I'm truly sorry—don't cry so—please—"

Oriana found her handkerchief and blew her nose. "I shall always love him—" she said in a stifled voice. "What you meant was that he wouldn't always love me—was that it? But what can we do? How can it be different? He's got nothing—and I have to live with Aymon. I thought we should—should all be so—so happy—" and she began to cry again.

As Blanche looked along the sands to the overhanging bank and

the path above it, she heard for the first time the echo of another voice—"She's young . . . don't force her." They gave her a pang, not of remorse but of helplessness, as if she were watching a stream run down into the sea. Oriana must taste the bitter with the sweet—but how soon? She turned to soothe and pacify her, and presently succeeded.

Later that night in a long, spiritually directed self-communion Blanche told herself that she was still doing her duty, unsympathetic though it was. The relationship with Daalgaard that Oriana had had in mind—the result of her ill-digested reading and crude day-dreams—must never materialise. The way to happiness stretched bare and arid; these easily dried tears were only a preliminary. As Blanche rose from her knees she saw one danger—that Oriana might perceive the falsity and invidiousness of that hasty comparison between her situation and the one formerly existing in Zoë de Freysac's "education" of Daalgaard.

Meanwhile Blanche must continue to hint and suggest until her pupil became inspired of her own accord with the idea of annulment and remarriage.

She proceeded to put her plans into execution; in the course of one or two further talks she drew Oriana into a completer subjugation. Viewing her friend partly as a confidante and partly as an oracle (for in Oriana's mind Blanche's fame was the outward sign of an infallible judgement in human affairs) the girl clung to her as never before. It was quite easy to make her see how dangerous and foolish were her increasingly prolonged tête-à-têtes with Daalgaard; while he saw in Blanche's presence the testimony of her promise not to force her pupil.

During the hours of Aymon's absence the three were happy enough. Blanche was aware that these times of quiet, chaperoned talk were no more than a prologue to crisis and climax; she had no wish to prolong them as she became more than ever convinced that Oriana and Daalgaard were made for one another.

"Are there any stories or legends connected with this house?" Blanche asked Oriana one afternoon when they were sitting on the terrace at their embroidery. Daalgaard had been reading aloud to them; now he put the book aside.

"I never heard any—it's not old enough for ghost stories—" said Oriana rather shortly.

There was a pause. Oriana glanced over her shoulder ; then she said :—

“I will tell you one thing—I would never go into the saloon alone after midnight.”

“Why not ?”

“Once, when old Jeanne was caretaker, she was there between midnight and one o’clock—she saw the figure of Philaminte—the one in the portrait over the mantelpiece—step down from its frame.”

“Did it go back again ?”

“She didn’t wait to see.”

Daalgaard’s eyes were on Oriana’s face ; he was trying to attune his expression to hers, which was one of awe and speculation.

“Do you imagine,” he said gravely, “that Philaminte’s spirit is restless ?”

“I don’t know. She only lived a year after this house was finished—at least, that’s what they say. She was not seventeen when she died.”

“Was she unhappy, I wonder ? Is anything known about her ?”

“Jeanne had a great-aunt who saw her once. She used to drive through the village in a coach and six and walk along the sands.”

“Alone ?”

“I think so. She was alone when she died. Hippolyte de Roncesvaulx was unkind to her, I believe.”

“Poor Philaminte. I wonder what her real name could have been ?”

Oriana shook her head. Then she said in a mysterious voice :—

“I think she was a witch. Perhaps she didn’t die at all.”

“O !—what do you think happened to her, then ?”

“If you laugh, I won’t tell you.”

There was a pause.

“Tell me what you believe—” said Charles Daalgaard in his gentlest tone.

“Well—the old women in the village say that she went back to her own people—to the African jungle.”

“And you think she did ?”

“I don’t know—” said Oriana very low, her eyes on the ground. “If she didn’t die, she must have stayed here, mustn’t she ? She had no money and no one to help her, unless—she was—you know.”

“Is anything more known about her ?”

"Nothing—except that she could cast spells over people."

"What sort of spells?"

"O—you know—the usual kind."

"Won't you explain?"

"She made Hippolyte de Roncesvaulx take her to Versailles, for one thing. She forced him away from his friends, and his family. She ruined his life."

"You mean, he was in love with her?"

"More than that. For a little while he did whatever she told him."

"That particular spell didn't last?"

"Perhaps she didn't want it to—" Oriana paused. "His wife died a year and a day after she—Philaminte—disappeared."

"Do you think she arranged that too?"

"Perhaps."

"And what happened to the Duc de Roncesvaulx?" Blanche put in.

"O! he married again and had eleven children."

"It seems to me that Philaminte's enchantments were nothing out of the ordinary—" murmured Daalgaard.

"What do you mean?" Oriana exclaimed. "She was a negress—how—"

"She was beautiful—judging by the portrait in the saloon."

"Do you think so?"

"Don't you?"

Oriana looked rather uneasy. "I dare say—" she muttered, turning her head away.

Daalgaard's eyes narrowed as he looked at her. "I don't think you need be alarmed—" he said gently.

"Alarmed?"

"Even if she was—or still is—all that you say—isn't there a sort of freemasonry among enchantresses?"

Oriana's smile quivered between pleasure and fear. "You shouldn't joke about such things—" she murmured.

"I'm not joking. How do you imagine Philaminte got away from this place?"

"How can I tell? I would rather not talk about her."

"Perhaps," suggested Daalgaard in a half mocking, half dreamy voice, "she rode away on a black mare—and told no one where she was going."

Oriana glanced at him from beneath her lashes. "That's not fair—you shouldn't remind me of disagreeable things."

"All the same—" said Blanche, "I did wonder what you were doing all those hours—the horses were quite fresh."

Oriana looked mischievous ; then she said :—"I went back to Yssimbault—to the village."

Daalgaard was contemplating her with a smile ; he hardly seemed to take in what she was saying. Oriana went on with her needlework for a moment ; then she said in a casual tone :—

"I took the dolls and tops and whips that Blanche and I bought in Paris."

"And did you share them fairly with the other children ?"

"O ! I only gave presents to the ones I liked best—the little ones. I don't care for the great girls—and I hate the boys." She paused, and then explained, as if he and she were alone :—"You see, before Blanche came to Yssimbault, I used to bathe with them and—and play games. I didn't know it was wrong."

"How did you find out ?"

"O ! well—they—we—they wanted me to give them money and food all the time. That made me angry."

"And so you quarrelled ?"

"Yes—till Blanche had the sewing-classes."

"Did that put matters right between you ?"

"Yes. Then they saw I was grown up, and a lady. I read aloud to them."

"I'm still slightly bewildered, I confess. If they did not know you were a lady before they came to the sewing-classes, how did they know afterwards ?"

"O ! that was simple. I wore my new dresses from Worth—and I was very distant towards them."

Charles Daalgaard threw back his head with a shout of laughter ; the sound gave Blanche a slight shock, although it was not the first time Oriana had caused it ; not at all offended, she gazed reminiscently in front of her.

"I must say I wish I had been there."

"O ! it was very dull really—" said Oriana languidly, "I thought it rather amusing at the time."

"And I suppose the boys heard from their sisters that you had changed ?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"When you came with the toys, did any of them see you?"

"No—they all ran away—" said Oriana rather wistfully.

"I expect they were wise—" said Daalgaard, smiling to himself.

"I don't see why."

"When I was a girl—" said Blanche, as the pause threatened to be a long one, "Every Christmas my father and I carried round a wash-tub full of toys and sweets to the Sunday-school children."

"A wash-tub? Do you mean a sort of bath?" asked Oriana.

Daalgaard and Blanche looked at one another, she doubtfully, he with a return of his ironical expression. "You don't know how the middle classes live, I'm afraid," he said, smiling at Oriana's puzzled glance.

"Are you—how do you live?" she abruptly enquired.

"As you see, Madame."

"But I really want to know—tell me how you lived in your own country."

His eyes dwelt on her eager face; he said slowly:—"It seems far away and long ago, now. What shall I tell you?"

"What did you do all day?"

"Very much what I do here."

Oriana pouted. "That's a horribly dull answer. Tell me what you had to eat—and who your friends were."

Blanche looked a little anxious; but Daalgaard still seemed amused; clasping his hands behind his head and looking down over the terraces and the flowers, he said deliberately:—

"We're rather barbaric—as compared with the French aristocracy."

"I'm not really French—you forget that—" Oriana hastily interposed.

"No—I don't forget it—" he replied, turning to look at her. There was a pause.

"Well?"

"What were we talking about?"

"About Denmark—do go on."

"Ah! yes, the food—it's rather less varied than at your table. There's a good deal of fish—and the bread is blacker and a bit leathery." He paused, half smiling, his eyes still on her face. "You wouldn't like it, I think."

"What else?"

"Let me see—we drink brandy and beer, rather than wine—you wouldn't care for that either. In the summer, there's—"

He broke off and got up. Oriana and Blanche raised their eyes. Aymon was standing behind them, his glance irritably flickering between their faces and Daalgaard's.

In a few abrupt sentences he informed them that M Desmarests had returned to Yssimbault a week ago, and was expected to dinner at the Villa the next day. Then, more curtly still, he summoned his steward into the library.

Blanche and Oriana remained looking at one another guiltily, as if the words—"Back a week ago—does he know anything?"—had been spoken aloud. A few moments later they followed the gentlemen indoors.

CHAPTER II *The Gothic Pavilion*

JEAN DESMARETS seemed to have returned from Paris in the best of humours. He complimented Aymon on the arrangement of his new possessions, thanked Blanche for staying on with his daughter, and admired Oriana's turquoise velvet gown and the Roncesvaulx rubies her husband had had reset for her in Paris.

He had grown thinner during his travels ; his gestures were less jerky, his manner quieter : yet never before had Blanche found herself so intimidated by him. His blandness still covered a ceaselessly working mechanism that she had forgotten how to deal with but not to fear. He laughed, asked questions and answered them himself, as he always had. More than once she wished that he would not look at her.

It seemed to Blanche that she had been subordinated to his attentions for many hours when he finally commanded Oriana to accompany him, without Aymon, round the gardens. They were not long absent and Blanche's alarm returned when she saw him come back alone and ask for his carriage with a steely courtesy.

For a moment or two Aymon stood looking after his father-in-law from the steps of the portico ; he turned to Blanche with a

smile and a commonplace remark, but she could see that he was disturbed. Presently he sent for his steward, and they rode off together.

Still apprehensive, Blanche went indoors, intending to ask Oriana why she had allowed her father to leave without seeing him off ; as she began to walk along the gallery she was summoned to Oriana's boudoir ; she entered it to find her pupil in tears. She raised a flushed face and seizing both Blanche's hands, exclaimed :—

“He's found out ! He knows !”

Blanche felt an icy shock run through her ; she was speechless. She gazed at Oriana, who pulled her down to a sitting position. The girl buried her head in the cushions and sobbed violently. Blanche forced herself to ask :—

“How did you come to tell him ?”

She had to repeat the question before Oriana replied :—“He asked me, of course.”

“Asked you ? How could he ? Who told him that Captain Daalgaard was living in this house ?”

Oriana raised her eyes and gave an hysterical laugh.

“We're talking at cross-purposes—of course he doesn't know about *that*—after all, there's been nothing—I mean—no, it's about Aymon. He was angry—he expected me to have a child next year, you see.”

Blanche stared at her pupil, slowly readjusting her ideas. The subject was one she shrank from discussing ; Oriana's next words gave her an almost physical recoil.

“He wants to see you—he wants you to tell him what has been going on.”

“I never heard of such a thing !” Blanche exclaimed, “I shall do nothing of the kind.”

“But you don't understand—he thinks that it is my fault.”

“Your fault ? That your husband is unfaithful to you ?”

“Yes. He said that I should not have let Zoë get Aymon back from Paris—at least, I think he meant that I should have made him fall in love with me when we were there.”

“She already had her claws in him—” said Blanche, with an outspokenness that surprised herself.

Oriana had sufficiently recovered to smile faintly. “I know—but he said I should have—you know—he said Aymon was a man

like other men. I don't think he is, myself—" she added, sniffing a little, "Do you? I didn't want him to fall in love with me."

"I know nothing of those aspects of life."

"Well—no—I suppose they don't come much in your books—" replied Oriana thoughtfully, "But you see how important it is. He'll never let it alone till—till—"

"Don't begin to cry again, dear child. Your father has been unjust. No doubt he is disappointed at there being no prospect of an heir, but—"

"You mean, that's Aymon's business?" put in Oriana. She blew her nose, and added,—"I dare say—but Papa will lecture him next, and then you."

"If M. Desmarests attempts to raise the subject with me, he will be disappointed."

"O ! but Blanche, you must help me. Don't you see ? He will try to find out if there is anyone else. If he suspects Charles, he will tell Aymon—don't you understand ?"

"You want me to shield—"

"It's not that, exactly—but you let Aymon believe that it was you Charles was in love with—why not Papa?"

The argument that followed was long and devious. Oriana drew it to a conclusion by declaring that she would not be responsible for her actions if Blanche refused to keep up the assumption of a relationship with Daalgaard. She wept and coaxed and implored : she threatened violence.

In the end Blanche was defeated. Her turn for M. Desmarests' court of enquiry was not yet ; she told herself that his judgement of Aymon might obviate it altogether. She was in fact sufficiently displeased by the millionaire's attitude (as reported by his daughter) to see some justice in allowing him to be deceived. Oriana had already told her father that Blanche was still with her on account of Daalgaard : so that if M. Desmarest raised the subject all Blanche need do was not to deny the assumption.

Oriana presently reverted to Mme de Freysac's power over her husband. "She has changed him—" she said slowly.

"I cannot believe—"

"Ah ! you're not married to him, Blanche. She has made him feel important. Perhaps he has become like other men after all."

Blanche changed the subject ; but the comment stuck in her mind.

Two days passed ; and the nearness of Aymon's interview with his father-in-law was clearly marked by his behaviour. Now Oriana began to fear her husband's tongue—suppose he were suddenly to suspect the real state of affairs ? Her father's methods of attack were brutal and terroristic ; she had always feared him, but now she was also concerned for Daalgaard.

She gave vent to these alarms two evenings after her father's reappearance, when she and Blanche and Daalgaard were alone in the drawing-room. She began to pace the floor, declaring that her happiness was over before it had begun ; her father and Aymon between them would reach the conclusion that she alone was to blame.

Charles Daalgaard had risen when she did ; he stood by the mantelpiece, looking at her ; for once she seemed unaware of his presence in her terror for his safety. Halfway through a sentence she dropped her face in her hands. He crossed the room and took her in his arms.

Apparently as oblivious of Blanche's presence as she, he stroked her hair without speaking for a moment or two. Then he raised her chin with one hand.

"You must stop crying"—he said in the tone he might have used to a child—"You are imagining the worst—and it cannot happen."

"Why not?" said Oriana, sobbing.

Daalgaard got out his handkerchief and wiped her eyes, carefully and gently ; his expression was composed, as if he had long been able to deal with these moods of despair. Oriana pushed his hand aside and repeated her question.

"I will tell you—if you promise not to cry."

She nodded and put the hair out of her eyes ; he continued quietly :—

"You forget that the Comte de Marécourt will not be thinking of you at all."

Oriana's expression wavered between bewilderment and pique. "Not thinking of me?" she repeated, and he went on :—

"No. Do you imagine he intends to be separated from my cousin ? She is—" he paused, and added in his tone of faint irony—"—essential to his happiness."

There was a silence in which Oriana looked away. She disengaged herself and walked slowly to the window ; her back to Daalgaard, she said in a grudging voice :—

“Yes—I suppose that’s true.”

Blanche was nonplussed. She had never for a moment suspected Oriana of jealousy ; yet her tone was quite wifely in its bitterness. Daalgaard smiled a little ; he was looking at the ground. Then he said :—

“Your husband will not deny his relationship with Mme de Freysac.”

“No ? What will he do, then ?” Oriana enquired sharply.

“He will take refuge behind her, I imagine.”

Oriana swung round ; she looked rather annoyed. “You mean, my father can’t turn her out ? How do you know ?”

He returned her glance steadily. “Surely she would have been turned out long ago if M. Desmarests had had any say in the matter ?”

There was a pause. Oriana walked over to one of the tables, picked up a glass paper-weight and fingered it absently.

“I still don’t see what Aymon can say to him—” she said in a low voice.

Daalgaard’s expression became lowering and heavy ; he said rather indistinctly :—

“He will put off your father with promises—that is what is generally done in such situations.”

“And then he’ll go back to Zoë ?”

There was no answer.

“O ! how I hate her !” Oriana exclaimed, thrusting out her chin with a look that reminded Blanche of her father. “I wish she were at the bottom of the river !”

Daalgaard’s face darkened further ; it seemed to Blanche that he was both disappointed and annoyed, perhaps because Oriana had forgotten him in her burst of hatred for his cousin. He dropped his hands on the back of a chair and looked down at them, as once before in Blanche’s presence, with an inward and sardonic derision. He said in an even, deliberate voice :—

“Are you not a little ungrateful ?”

“She’s very wicked—she tried to poison Blanche—” said Oriana primly.

"You have already told me that Captain Daalgaard believes me to have imagined that incident—" said Blanche hastily. "Please do not make use of it—it was told you in confidence."

Oriana smiled and turned away ; then she glanced at Daalgaard and said in her teasing voice :—

"Have I been rude ? I always forget she's your cousin."

Daalgaard shook his head ; his expression was cold and withdrawn.

"What are you thinking about?" Oriana pursued.

He looked up at her. There was a pause. Then his embittered composure quivered and broke. She glided across the room and put her arms round his neck, leaning back to look into his face. "Why, you—you're—"

"It's nothing."

"But tell me—"

"I can't—" said Daalgaard in a stifled tone, turning his head away.

At this point Blanche left the room, but not before she heard him mutter something that sounded like "You don't understand—it's because I've no right—" Oriana's whispered reply was lost as she shut the door.

The following afternoon Blanche's interview with Jean Desmarests took place in the library at Yssimbault. His opening threw her off her guard.

"Now then, Mademoiselle—what is all this about a swimming-bath?"

After a pause Blanche replied blankly :—"It was Oriana's idea —she—"

"Hers ? Not her husband's?"

"The Comte de Marécourt has never used it."

"You mean my daughter has?"

"Only twice. It is hardly warm enough yet to—"

"It's an absurd notion. She has the sea and the river at her feet—if she must bathe, why not there?"

"She has made a hobby of the decorations for the swimming-bath. She felt, I think, that it was something entirely her own. I told her it was extravagant and foolish."

"Does she spend much time there?"

"No—" said Blanche, increasingly bewildered.

Jean Desmarests got up from the table against which he had been leaning and walked over to his desk ; then he said abruptly :—

“I am disappointed in you, Mademoiselle.”

“So I gathered, Monsieur. Please tell me why.”

“I counted on you to get that woman out of Marécourt.”

“Mme de Freysac has only once set foot in the Villa since we returned there. She and your daughter have not met at all.”

“What is the use of telling me that ? You know what the circumstances are.”

“I—I believe that the Comte de Marécourt’s predilection for her will pass—” said Blanche rather faintly.

“And meanwhile—what of my daughter ?”

“She is not to blame.”

“You are wrong—but that’s not what I wished to discuss with you.” He added sharply :—“What is she up to ? Is she making a fool of herself ? Did she meet anyone in Paris who took her fancy ?”

Blanche was thankful that she need only answer the last question. She replied that Oriana had met no one in Paris who was likely to supplant her husband. “The neglect has been on his side since the beginning—” she added in a firmer tone.

“I am glad to hear you say so. I have had a little talk with my son-in-law—and I think we shall see an improvement in that direction before long—” said M. Desmarests with grim lightness.

After a short silence Blanche asked whether she might make her own suggestion ; she received a nod and a keen look. She began :—

“Your daughter is not happy with her husband—she never will be.”

“Well—what do you propose ?”

Stiffened by the satirical inflection, Blanche was able to say quite steadily :—“They would be better apart.”

“Apart ? What do you mean ?”

“The marriage could be annulled.”

Much to her surprise, no outburst followed this remark, only a silence during which his eyes did not leave her face.

“I don’t intend that—” he said at last in a cool, matter-of-fact tone, “We don’t break up marriages over here—we adjust them.”

“I see. I thought you would not consider it.”

“Have you spoken to Oriana of this scheme ?”

“No.”

"Then you will oblige me by not doing so—and in one other matter."

"What is that?"

"Keep her mind on her duties. She knows what they are."

Blanche made no reply. Then with immense relief she perceived that the lecture had come to an end. M Desmarests now became affability itself ; he kept her with him for an hour or more and they conversed on a number of subjects. He showed her his Russian porcelain, asked about her writing and wondered that she could endure so long an exile. It was not till she was on the way home that she realised she had been subjected to a subtle and unobtrusive catechism. Jean Desmarests' friendly manner, following immediately on sternness, had made her more communicative than she had intended ; now he knew that she was prepared to stay on indefinitely as his daughter's companion ; as she pictured him adding this information to that Oriana had provided she felt herself justified in meeting such prepotence with evasion. Now more than ever annulment must be the first consideration ; she believed that the time was approaching for her to propose it to Oriana.

All the rest of that day Aymon was absent from home ; he sent word that he would not be back for dinner. Oriana was restless and uneasy ; in spite of all Blanche could say she was terrified of her father's power to separate her from Daalgaard. When he joined them after dinner Blanche became aware that he shared this anxiety ; he was more silent than usual and at the same time less composed. Their talk was constrained. Whatever clouds hung over them could not be dissipated by any of their evening pursuits, and they separated early.

Blanche could not sleep. For a long time she lay restlessly in the dark ; at last she lit her candle so as to read herself to sleep again. She was surprised to see that it was half-past four ; she had been lying awake for more than six hours. The room seemed close and hot. She sat up and drew back the bed-curtains.

For many hours her thoughts had been far from Yssimbault and Marécourt ; they had taken her back to London, not to the comfortable, well-kept city of the Merchants and their world, but to the slums and docks of her girlhood, to the greasy wash of the river against its pitch-black banks, the tottering tall houses, the gas-flares and the foul-smelling paving-stones of Rotherhithe.

These memories were no longer unendurably vivid, but ghostly and impalpable ; the phantoms of misery and crime floated between her and her surroundings like thin mists ; she got out of bed and drew up the blind, as if to brush them away. The moonlight streamed in icy brilliance through the window ; she opened it, and looked out over the gardens ; she could see beyond the terraces to the dark shining oblong of the pool. The fretted curves of the pavilion were bluish-white against the cypresses.

Oriana and Daalgaard came out from beneath the pointed shadows of the pavilion, two distinct, colourless figures between the white stone and the black water. They moved slowly, hand in hand. Then they stopped. He took her in his arms.

They drew apart and looked back, and then at one another. He left her standing by the water. He walked quickly away ; a moment later he had disappeared in the shadows of the trees.

Oriana did not look after him. She stood still for a long time, her face bent down, her hands at her sides. At last she raised her arms and stretched them above her head. She began to walk towards the house, her long pale skirts trailing, her hands clasped in front of her. At the first terrace she paused, and looked back again. Then she turned and continued to walk slowly forward.

PART III ATROPOS

"Sophie pleurait : mais la poupée restait cassée."

MME DE SEGUR.

CHAPTER I Danger

"It seems to me," said Aymon, "that we shall have to follow the fashion, vulgar though it is, and start smoking cigarettes—out of doors, at least. The flies are positively dangerous. What do you say, Mademoiselle?" Shading his eyes with his narrow hand, he walked down the steps of the stone arbour and looked across the flowers to the fountains.

Oriana did not raise her eyes from her book; the Duchesse de Roncevaux primmed up her mouth and went on with her embroidery: Blanche looked from one to the other before she replied:

"I have always found a shady hat and a veil protection enough."

"And gloves—" murmured Oriana, apparently still intent on her reading. Aware that she had supplemented Blanche's reply instead of listening to his suggestion, Aymon frowned. He turned to his mother.

"You would object, Madame, of course—" he said with his thin smile.

"Certainly," she replied.

"And yet I've seen a pretty woman smoking a cigarette quite charmingly—it depends on the manner," went on Aymon, looking round. "It's not an English practice, I believe?"

"Not yet," said Blanche, smiling. "We shall come to it one day—and why not?—but not in my lifetime."

"You would not care to start the fashion—be a pioneer?"

"No—not for such a triviality. Our sex is under graver disadvantages than a taboo on cigarettes," said Blanche, not quite seriously.

"Good heavens! do you believe in—what are they called?—women's rights?" Aymon exclaimed in a delighted tone.

"I do."

"Do you hear, Madame?" Aymon continued, turning again to his mother. "We have been harbouring a firebrand—did you know about this?" to Oriana.

"I know better than to raise such subjects here, Monsieur de Marécourt," said Blanche with a nervous glance in the old lady's direction. "For one thing, they are of no interest in a country where—"

"Well? Don't spare us."

"I was going to say, where women have as a rule a more clearly defined status—in all classes."

"That is quite true—" said Mme de Roncesvaulx approvingly. "The history of our Church—"

"Ah! but before we go into that," interrupted Aymon, "what exactly do you mean, Mlle Cathos? What is your comparison?"

"To be a Frenchwoman is almost a profession—an Englishwoman is too often no more than an accessory," said Blanche rather bitterly.

"Upon my word, you're too kind—do you say things like that at home?"

"It depends where I am—" said Blanche, regaining her lightness of tone.

"I should hate to be English—" said Oriana, who had been listening dreamily. Unconscious of her husband's glance and smile, she went on:—"If they were like Blanche, then of course—but she's different."

"Mademoiselle is unique, naturally," said Aymon with his mechanical gallantry. "But—" he broke off, as if he were suddenly bored, much to Blanche's relief. She said quickly:—

"I suppose we all think ourselves unique—though we don't want it to appear too obvious."

"Clever women are rare in any country—" put in Mme de Roncesvaulx with a grim, not wholly approving smile. "You will find that wherever you go."

Aymon looked rather annoyed; he leant back against the pillar, fingering his whiskers; Oriana gave him a blank, brief glance and returned to her book. He contemplated the piled mass of her curls with a complacent expression, as if for the first time. At this point Blanche had to remind herself that only forty-eight hours had passed since his interview with his father-in-law; it seemed to her

very much longer. She dared not think of anyone but Oriana whom she had avoided all day. Now it was evening. A peculiar cold intentness came over her as she realised that before long they must be alone and speak without concealment or pretence.

"It's a little cooler," said Aymon, still looking at his wife. "Will you come for a stroll? We might walk towards the swimming-bath—it will be shady there."

Oriana looked up at him. "It's too hot still—" she said with a shrug.

"I thought you liked the hot weather."

"I think one feels the heat more these first days," Blanche put in hastily, "by the end of June we shall have become accustomed to it."

With his air of mastery, Aymon took up Oriana's parasol and opened it; then he offered her his arm. She said nothing. The Duchesse de Rôncesvaulx lowered her tambour-frame and watched them.

"Don't tell me—" continued Aymon with great amiability, "that your book is so absorbing as to—is it one of Mademoiselle's?"

Still without speaking, Oriana held it towards him. He glanced at it and laughed.

"Poetry! I had no notion you cared for it. Where did this come from? Ah! I remember now—sugary, waltz-time stuff—the sort of thing people found wonderfully moving when sensibility was the fashion." He fluttered the pages and put the book on the steps below him.

"I never read any till now—" said Oriana in a low voice.

"Can't I persuade you to leave it—just for half an hour?"

Oriana got up automatically. The jewels on her bodice quivered as the light caught them. Then she stepped out into the sunshine, staring ahead of her. Mme de Rôncesvaulx said in her cold grating voice:—

"Your hat, my child—you have no hat on."

Oriana turned and picked up the broad pink muslin hat, trimmed to match her dress with a narrow edging of rust-coloured velvet ribbon; she looked round for her gloves which Aymon gave her; as she stood, her head bent, drawing them slowly over her hands, Blanche saw her breathe quickly and press her lips together; when she looked up her expression was one of bored indifference.

"I want to walk by the river—" she said in her spoiled beauty voice.

"Are you tired of your new toy so soon? The river then, by all means—" replied Aymon, and they walked away together.

Blanche heard him say, "By the way, I have a little surprise for you—" and, aware that Mme de Roncesvaulx's glance was still following them, she took up the volume of poetry and turned over the pages. She continued to stare unseeingly at the narrow columns of print; she heard the faint popping sound of the needle going in and out of the canvas as her companion began to work again. After a moment or two Mme de Roncesvaulx said without looking up:—

"I read one of your romances the other day, Mademoiselle—*The Coronet and the Sword*." She paused, and added judicially:—"Very clever—very ingenious."

Blanche murmured something polite, and there was silence for a moment longer. The older woman threaded her needle before she spoke again.

"You must be a happy woman."

"I think I am—" said Blanche, rather startled, "I know I have been a fortunate one."

"You have a remarkable gift—but no doubt you take that for granted."

"I have always looked 'on it as a responsibility."

"Ah!—I know no writers—is that the usual attitude of the novelist towards his creations?"

"I don't know, Madame. I suppose it is not invariable. My books appeal chiefly to young people. Naturally that makes my position a responsible one."

There was a pause. Then Mme de Roncesvaulx said deliberately:—

"It must have occurred to you, of course, that any young person—a young girl, particularly—might miss the moral content of your novels in the excitement of following the story?"

"At the time of reading that might be so. But afterwards, in recalling the actions and the characters, the distinction between right and wrong generally becomes clear. At least, that is the impression I have received from the young people who have talked to me about my books."

"I see. And do you have much difficulty in reconciling all this drama and excitement—and temptation—with the ultimate triumph of virtue?"

"All writing is worrying, arduous work, Madame. That is only one of a hundred problems which are part of every production."

"It seems to me," said the old lady after another silence, "that if—as must be the case—you have absolute power over your characters, your responsibility towards your audience is considerably simplified." She worked on for a little while, and then added with an indefinable change of tone :—

"It is not as if you were directing the actions of human beings, who are to a great extent irresponsible."

"No—to me it is simpler than that—" said Blanche thoughtfully. "Most writers would tell you that their heroes and heroines seem to them like real people—I have never considered mine as entities in that sense."

"Yet you describe them with such conviction. In this book I have been reading, for instance, your heroine is remarkably life-like."

"I am glad you thought that, Madame."

"It was easy and indeed pleasant, to enter into her desires and her unhappiness—surely you must have felt some part of them when you were writing about her?"

"Perhaps—vicariously."

"As one read on—" the other pursued in an even, almost casual tone, "it seemed inevitable that she should achieve happiness without sin."

"That was my intention," said Blanche with a grateful look; but her companion's neat iron-grey head was still bent over her embroidery.

"And—without scandal—" said Mme de Roncesvaulx, leaning back to look at her work.

Blanche began to feel a little bewildered. "Of course—without scandal—" she murmured.

"Her husband was disposed of in such a way that one accepted his death as a just consequence of the preceding events in the story."

"Yes—that was—"

"And yet—" Mme de Roncesvaulx continued smoothly, "those events were not in themselves unusual or forced on the reader."

"I hope they were not"

"It all seemed so natural—and—shall I say, easy—it could only have happened just as you described it." She paused. "Have you ever—perhaps I ought not to ask—known such a series of events, as you outline them in *The Coronet and the Sword?*"

"O ! no, Madame. I have a horror of taking incidents from real life—all my stories are, as far as I am aware, absolutely self-created."

"Indeed ? That's very remarkable—and very praiseworthy."

Blanche felt rather uneasy ; but her companion's tone was perfectly pleasant and straightforward.

Mme de Roncesvaulx finished the petal of the flower she had been working on and cut the thread with a tiny pair of gilt scissors ; then she began to look through her work-box ; a moment later she held up a skein of pale green silk to the light, her eyes half closed.

"In life—" she remarked, with cool emphasis, "you must often have observed the indissolubility and violence of the—ah—discrepancies, that you dispose of so ingeniously in your novels."

Blanche was silent. Mme de Roncesvaulx continued in a tone of mild contemplation :—

"You must have deplored the rigidity and the capriciousness of human material, as compared with its counterfeit, as created by yourself."

"I—I never compared them—" Blanche replied.

"I suppose not—that would be a dangerous mistake, possibly a fatal one—" said the Duchesse de Roncesvaulx very calmly indeed.

She waited for nearly a minute ; then she said in the tone of deliberate assessment with which she had started their talk :—

"Naturally, a woman of your qualities and experience knows where to draw the line between influence and creation."

"I don't quite understand—" put in Blanche in a faltering tone.

"I mean that you are able, surely, to exercise influence over the people that you meet without confounding that power with your talent for imaginative writing. Another woman, perhaps equally gifted, might think that because she had found a way out—I believe that is the phrase ?—for the heroine of a novel, she might do the same service for a friend." She gave Blanche an expressionless glance, and pursued :—

"You, of course, realise that happiness has nothing to do with life in this world. We are not here to achieve it for ourselves—or even for others."

Blanche said nothing. The old lady went on :—

“Few marriages, for instance, are happy, in the sense in which a writer of romances uses the word. I am of course aware that we in this country take a more serious and practical view of that institution than the English, who are on the whole, a romantic people.”

“I have heard that criticism,” said Blanche in a low voice.

“And of course you do not subscribe to it,” said Mme de Roncesvaulx with an indulgent smile.

“Not entirely.”

“That is very natural.”

There was a short silence. Mme de Roncesvaulx gave her work another glance and then said briskly :—

“It will soon be dusk—shall we go in? At this time of the evening there is always a danger of the damps rising from the river. Perhaps you will be so kind as to give me your arm, Mademoiselle.”

The Duchesse de Roncesvaulx made this request as if she were conferring a favour. Blanche saw the gesture as the sugar after the pill. She controlled her own annoyance and sense of injustice with little difficulty ; but it was alarming to realise how much this harsh old woman had taken in of her daughter-in-law’s situation. The possibility of her having set a watch on Oriana could be rejected ; it was safe to assume that she saw Charles Daalgaard’s presence as a sign of danger, no more. She might overlook immorality, provided it was discreetly conducted, but never a scandal.

Blanche now perceived that all those near Oriana, even her lover, might very well combine in leading her to the degradation of a secret or semi-secret intrigue. She no longer shrank from the recollection of Oriana and Daalgaard as she had last seen them. She only knew that she must establish and regularise their love, in spite of all the difficulties.

Oriana and her husband had preceded them indoors. This was generally the time that Mme de Roncesvaulx’s carriage was sent for ; but she settled herself in a high-backed chair in the huge white and gold saloon—a room used only during the summer months—and asked her daughter-in-law to sing.

Oriana walked into the circle of lamplight without speaking. Blanche saw that she looked exhausted and almost plain ; her skin was patchy and flushed and her eyelids swollen : yet she did not

seem to have been weeping. She took up the guitar with clumsy and uncertain movements and then sat without moving for a moment or two, as if she had forgotten what to do. Aymon suggested that she should sing one of the Sicilian ballads she had learnt as a child from an old servant of her mother's. Oriana looked at him with a kind of stupid docility, and struck a chord ; the instrument was out of tune.

Aymon protested, and came over to tighten the strings. The Duchesse de Roncesvaulx said amiably :—“Perhaps you are tired?” but Oriana shook her head, her eyes on her husband's long useless-looking fingers. Suddenly she shuddered and buried her face in her hands.

Aymon put his hand on her shoulder and suggested that she should go to bed—was she feverish?—had she a headache? Oriana shook her head again and took the guitar from him. There was a pause while she seemed to collect herself ; then her voice rose, husky and soft, in the silent room.

Aymon walked over to the window and stood there, looking out at the sunset ; he had the trick of graceful and elegant poise ; his profile showed clear and fine against the brocaded curtains ; he seemed in an excellent humour.

After Oriana had sung several songs the tray of tisane and chocolate and sweet biscuits was brought in. When the cups had been handed round, Aymon said, smiling :—

“You have not told my mother your little surprise, Oriana.”

He seldom, if ever, spoke to his wife so familiarly ; but Oriana did not seem to notice the change. She said dully :—“No, I haven't”—and there was a pause. Her husband then explained that he had sent for her monkey from Yssimbault—the fact was that he could not imagine Oriana without her pets ; and an Italian greyhound was arriving to replace the dead griffon.

His indulgent, half-teasing way of describing his intentions was received by his mother with an equal pleasantness ; she even joined in his pretended anxiety for the bibelots with which Oriana's rooms were scattered—could he not have found a more suitable playmate for a young woman surrounded by so much that was delicate and rare? Oriana replied hardly at all except to murmur agreement to whatever was said. Once or twice she looked at the clock, not anxiously, but with a dull surprise, as if she had been sitting there

for many hours. Her only individual action was that of ordering the curtains to be drawn almost before it was dark, although her husband protested against shutting out the beauty of the evening ; then she remained quiet, staring at the ground.

Once or twice Blanche noticed the Duchesse de Roncesvaulx watching her son and his wife with a curiously triumphant expression, as of one who observes the working out of a manœuvre. She congratulated Oriana on her singing ; she avoided Aymon's glance : she seemed to have forgotten Blanche altogether.

Later on Blanche waited for Oriana a long time ; at last, just as she had given up hope, the girl came into her little sitting-room.

She was quite composed ; her expression was remote and visionary ; the petted, capricious, half-childish creature Blanche had found and tamed was no more : she was gazing into the eyes of a stranger.

Oriana sank on to the floor and leant against Blanche's knee. The older woman said nothing ; she touched the silky, springing hair with the tip of one finger. Oriana said very low :—

“I'm afraid.”

“Won't you tell me why ?”

There was a long silence. Blanche said gently :—“I saw you come in last night. I was awake.”

Still Oriana said nothing. Blanche took one of the small rounded hands in hers. “Don't be afraid—” she said, “everything will come right. You have only to believe that it will.”

A tear dropped on the clasped fingers. Conscious of a rising excitement, Blanche continued in a fuller, stronger voice :—

“We will discuss all this when you are calmer. I shall help you—you are going to be very happy.” She paused, and repeated with the hypnotic assurance of a seer :—

“Very happy—for always—you will see—” while her hand continued to sweep lightly across the black curls against her knee.

“I haven't seen him to-day—I shall see him to-morrow—” said Oriana at last in a tone that showed how often she had repeated the sentence to herself. Then she added :—

“You won't leave me, Blanche ? You're the only person I can talk to about him.”

“Of course I shall stay with you.”

Oriana said nothing. Presently she relaxed her upright position and leaning back, looked upwards into Blanche's face.

"I suppose I'm the happiest person in the whole world—" she said slowly, and her lips parted in a trembling smile.

CHAPTER 2 *Four Days*

A FEW days later Blanche rehearsed for the last time her suggestions for the annulment of Oriana's marriage. It was probable that her pupil might not have heard of the process ; it would be difficult to reconcile her to the effort it must entail ; yet Blanche believed her to be in that state of mind which opens itself to new ideas and wider horizons. Whether Oriana acclaimed or rejected the scheme it would at least give her something constructive to think about.

During these days the improved relations between the Comte de Marécourt and his wife became apparent to all those surrounding them, their neighbours included. Blanche overheard two of the servants discussing the change ; the major-domo, who had known them all their lives, opined that M. Aymon was getting tired of the Russian woman at last and that before another year was out he might expect an heir. It was hard to believe that Aymon's new amiability might be the result of his father-in-law's influence or that in a single discourse Jean Desmarcts had turned the young man's eyes from Zoë to Oriana.

Then Aymon announced that he was leaving for Paris and would be absent for several days. On the morning of his departure Blanche put on her thinnest dress (for the weather continued very hot and still) and set out for the woods of Marécourt. There, at least, it would be shady ; she intended to walk by the stream under the trees. Charles Daalgaard was occupied at some miles' distance from the Villa and did not expect to return until nightfall ; Oriana had gone to visit her mother-in-law, who was in bed with an attack of rheumatism.

The stream ran along the bottom of a deep valley ; the trees arched over its shallow waters, separating them from a bridle-path, which Blanche followed for an hour or more. A few cottages were perched between the path and the stream, divided from one another by rough

pens for livestock ; some hens cackled and fluttered as Blanche's blue and white gown appeared through the glancing shadows. When she had passed the last house she climbed down the path to the brook. There were smooth shelves of rock to lean against here : and a tiny beach of coarse shingle spread itself near a pool fringed with dark and glittering mosses. Blanche established herself in this hidden grotto, removed her gloves and unpinned her hat ; she gazed into the topaz and amber of the clear water and the steely darkness of the pool. Then she leant back and shut her eyes. The tapping and beating of the stream against the rocks swelled and faded. She began to dream almost at once, in a confused yet vivid illusion of reality ; she was talking to someone in a low clear voice, a voice that she was imitating or had borrowed from another woman.

“—and you will let me know what happens ?”

“I shall send for you as soon as possible.”

Aymon de Marécourt was speaking now. Blanche opened her eyes. The stream clucked and gurgled and rushed away over a sentence she could not hear ; then came the sound of a low laugh. Aymon exclaimed :—

“Spare me your mockery at least ! Whatever I do—whatever I am—is for you, and because of you.”

Blanche was wide awake now ; she knew whose voice had entered into her dreams ; she waited impatiently for the answer.

“I’m not laughing at you, my dear friend—only at the situation.”

“You know I can’t endure my life here without you—you’ll come back ?”

“Of course.”

“Are you serious ? Look at me.”

“The sun’s in my eyes.”

“Zoë—for God’s sake—”

“Let us walk on.”

“You know that if it had not been for you, I could not—I should never—”

The voices faded and passed out of hearing.

Blanche got up and looked above the rock against which she had been leaning ; she could see nothing ; there was not even the flutter of a skirt to guide her eyes. But she had not been dreaming for the last five minutes, although what she had overheard was more

bewildering than any dream ; Aymon's vehemence had been unfamiliar and startling, while Zoë de Freysac seemed to have been speaking in character.

Blanche waited a few moments longer and then turned to go home. One phrase recurred as she walked slowly through the glades of sunlight and shadow—"Whatever I do—whatever I am—is for you, and because of you".

She found Oriana in high spirits. Mme de Roncesvaulx would be confined to her room for ten days at least ; M. Desmarests was leaving for Alsace and would be absent several weeks ; until Aymon came back from Paris they had the Villa to themselves.

"He's gone with her—" said Oriana, who seemed as unwilling as Blanche to mention Mme de Freysac by name, "Perhaps he'll be away longer than a few days. How odd you look—is anything the matter?"

"I went for a walk in the woods and fell asleep by the stream—" said Blanche absently. "Where have you been?"

"To Marécourt—I just told you. Now I'm going to bathe."

They were standing by the windows of the grand saloon ; Blanche glanced at the lengthening shadows and said in the same remote voice :—

"There will be no sun now—won't it be too cold!"

"Well, I can't bathe until it's in shadow, can I ! Or do you want me to get sunburnt—like last summer?"

"Oriana!"

"Yes?"

"Surely you are not—you cannot bathe without—"

"Of course I can. All the gardeners have gone home. I like to feel the air on my skin—it's hateful to be muffled up in a bathing dress."

"Suppose someone were to see you from the windows?"

"No one will—except you. But you can come down and keep watch if you are nervous."

"M. de Marécourt would forbid it if he were here."

"Well, he's on his way to Paris by now," said Oriana, smiling. "Won't you come with me ? Do."

There was a pause while the two friends looked at one another ; the older woman was reminded of their first meeting ; just for a moment the wild, half-grown girl of Yssimbault reappeared in

Oriana's coaxing manner and sidelong smile. Blanche shook her head and turned away.

"I've put off dinner for an hour—do come, dear Blanche—" went on the husky, cajoling voice behind her.

"I'm afraid you're nothing but a savage."

"O ! dear—you are cross—" Oriana's arm was round her waist now—"Can't I persuade you ? Are you going to be unkind, when I'm so happy ?"

In the end Blanche agreed to walk as far as the swimming-bath ; while Oriana bathed she would keep watch, after all ; she felt herself sliding into a dreamy acquiescence as they moved through the late sunshine to the oblong of dark water. Oriana ran along it to the pavilion and disappeared, dropping her parasol on the bank.

Suddenly Blanche felt tired to death ; she had not slept well these last nights, and the drowsiness that had come over her by the stream returned. She sat down on the marble bench at the far end of the pool and closed her eyes. When she opened them again Oriana was already in the water.

It seemed far too much trouble to get up and walk away, pleasanter to sit still. Oriana dived and swam like a fish ; Blanche recalled what she had heard of her bathes at Yssimbault, accepting the implications with the indifference of mental exhaustion. Now she forgot all that had puzzled her. Nothing harmful or wrong could happen in this Eden, this paradise of summer, where beauty poised itself, unselfconscious and unadorned, against a frieze of Italianate white and green.

Blanche walked back alone to the house and slowly dressed for dinner. As soon as she and Oriana had finished their coffee Charles Daalgaard joined them on the terrace. Oriana leaned forward and turned up the oil lamp that stood on the little table in front of her. Daalgaard was standing behind it, his features indistinguishable in the gloom. The light fell on Oriana, lying on a chaise-longue ; her primrose silk frills swept over her feet to the floor. She moved a little, lifting her hand ; Daalgaard drew forward a chair, and sat between her and Blanche, staring out into the scented dusk. Oriana said :—

"Shall I make you some coffee ?"

"No, thank you—" said Daalgaard, turning to look at her.

"Are you tired ? Have you been working hard all day ?"

"I have been busy. The day didn't seem long."

"Had you a great many things to think of?"

There was a pause ; then he said slowly :—"I can't remember very well. I know I got hot and dirty. I tried not to think of anything but what I was doing—it wasn't very successful." He smiled and then went on :—"I remember now—I rebuilt part of a wall, and after that I dug up a dead peach-tree in one of the orchards."

"But that's not your work—you're—"

"I sometimes do the odd jobs that no one else has time for—it's easier than giving orders when you're—when you want the hours to go quickly."

"And did they?"

"I think so. Now that I'm back here—it's strange—"

"What is?"

"Time seems to stand still in this place. It's difficult to remember what it was like, over there, in the sunshine."

There was a pause. Oriana sat up and rubbed her ankle ; her hair was still damp from her bathe : it clung in flat rings to her head. "Do you know what is in this box?" she said, her fingers straying towards the table.

His glance drew itself slowly away from hers ; he looked at Blanche, and from her to the lighted room behind them ; when he answered his voice had changed.

"It's too hot to guess—won't you tell me?"

"Cigarettes. I'm going to smoke one. The midges are biting me through my stockings."

Daalgaard leant back, and clasping his hands behind his head, looked at her with a smile.

"Mademoiselle will be shocked."

"No, she won't—she thinks women should be allowed to smoke just like men—" replied Oriana, opening the box. "We can burn some pastilles afterwards—then I shall hide this in the library."

She lit a cigarette at the lamp and puffed at it cautiously. Daalgaard continued to watch her without moving.

"Won't you have one?" she enquired.

He shook his head. Oriana looked rather uneasy. "Do you think I ought not? Does it look horrid?"

There was no answer ; but Oriana did not seem to require one. Blanche's eyes had been on her work ; now she looked up to see

Oriana's hand dropped to the floor as if it had just been released ; the other held her cigarette at arm's length ; she was looking at it through half-closed eyes.

"I shall enjoy telling Father Perrot about this," she announced defiantly.

"Will he be angry?" said Daalgaard.

Oriana nodded and silence fell again ; then she said thoughtfully :—

"My sins grow more—I mean bigger ones—as I get older. Do yours?"

"Very likely they do. I'm not in a position to say."

Oriana stared. "Aren't you a Catholic?"

"No."

"What, then?"

"I was born in Russia and baptised into the Greek Church, I believe."

"You believe? Don't you know? What church do you go to?"

"None."

"None? Do you mean—not since you left home?"

Daalgaard had been looking at her with a dreamy, half-smiling absorption. He shook his head. Oriana sat up and threw her cigarette away.

"Are you a heathen?" she abruptly enquired.

"I have no religious beliefs."

Oriana continued to stare in silence for a moment or two ; then she shrugged her shoulders. "Well!" she exclaimed, more in resignation than disapproval ; she added in a brisk, business-like tone that reminded Blanche of Jean Desmarests :—"I shall lend you—no, give you—some little books. I have plenty upstairs."

Daalgaard lowered his glance ; he seemed to be suppressing a smile ; when he looked up his expression was serious and attentive. "I would rather you told me what was in them."

Oriana looked suspicious. "I don't explain very well—the books tell you everything."

"I'm afraid it's rather late for that."

"Don't you want to be told? Don't you ever think about dying, for instance?"

"Well—this time last year I was thinking about it a good deal."

"Weren't you frightened?"

"Sometimes."

There was another silence.

"Life—" said Oriana, leaning forward, her chin on her hand—"should be a preparation for death—and eternity."

"So I've been told."

"You mean I'm—you don't want to hear?"

"I want to hear whatever you tell me."

"But this is very important—very serious."

Daalgaard's head was bent as if he were considering. Oriana put out her hand and touched his hair ; he took her fingers in his ; then he said in a low voice :—"Is it ? Are you sure ?"

After another long silence Oriana disengaged herself and swung her feet to the ground ; she stood up and peered out into the silent garden ; then she walked slowly down the steps and leaned against the balustrade. Now Blanche could no longer see whether Daalgaaard was still watching her ; as she moved away, her gleaming skirts held up with one hand, he rose and followed, adapting his long strides to her gliding steps ; they paced the whole length of the terrace and then disappeared. Blanche sat on a little while, neither working nor reading. Then she went indoors.

During the next four days the moment for broaching the question of annulment and remarriage never came ; neither seemed to have any part in the radiant days and sultry nights of the breathless June weather, nor any connection with the story that was writing itself before Blanche's entranced and wondering gaze. Sometimes in the past a piece of work had unfolded itself so, almost without effort ; she was aware of the temptation to sentimentalise as she watched this perfect and yet fortuitous happiness, an idyll in a rococo setting ; she felt herself benignant, watchful and strong.

It did not seem odd to her that no one ever called on them now, not even the Riquet-Toustain sisters ; Oriana had made no attempt to keep up such intimacy as had once existed between them and her : and her relationship, never a happy one, with the Caumonts, their nearest neighbours, had dwindled to a mere formality ; nor were the other families that had entertained and been received by Aymon during the first weeks after his return mentioned by his wife ; it was as if they had never existed. Later on it occurred to Blanche that this must have been the inauguration of Oriana's social ostracism.

Stillness hung over the Villa from dawn to dusk. Oriana bathed

every evening as soon as the shadows had engulfed the pool ; she and Blanche dined late ; then there was coffee on the terrace or in the arbour ; then Blanche would sit alone and listen to the murmuring voices and the whisper and rustle of trailing silk in the perfumed darkness of the garden.

And later still her fancy followed through the alleys, down the terraces to the pavilion, skull-white in the rising moon : she saw its splintered reflection as the pool shivered and broke into pointed waves : in her dreams she watched the water rocking itself to sleep under the first pale light of morning.

The Comte de Marécourt returned in the late afternoon of the fifth day : and two days after that, Blanche became aware that grounds for the annulment of his marriage had ceased, strictly speaking, to exist.

CHAPTER 3 *The Victim*

SINCE her return from Paris Blanche's letters to the Marchants had diminished in frequency as in length. She heard of the birth of Cordelia's fifth child and second daughter with a curious indifference : that it was to be christened Isabel, after the heroine of *Only A Governess*, seemed to her tactless and inept, as if her friends were attempting to recall her to the past ; nothing she had achieved in their world could compare with the task she had now set herself, that of a happy ending for Daalgaard and Oriana.

As soon as she had had time to assimilate the altered situation Blanche's resolve strengthened and she thought of a fresh scheme. But the time to speak of it was not yet come ; during the week that followed Aymon's return her talks with Oriana were conducted in an atmosphere of defiance and dissimulation.

Seeing the girl extremely distressed the day after her husband's return, Blanche thought that the suggestion of escape through annulment might comfort her. Oriana's response was given with crude and bitter mockery ; then, before Blanche could fully take in her meaning, she assumed a metallic hardness of tone. She refused further confidences ; later in the day she approached Blanche

and demanded absolute secrecy : at all costs her situation must be concealed from Charles Daalgaard. Blanche agreed. In any case, how could she discuss such matters with a third person ? Oriana laughed disagreeably. Blanche noted her look of suffering and exhaustion ; when she gently expressed her sympathy Oriana left the room. They said no more to one another for several days.

At last early one evening they were walking in the garden. Blanche had both dreaded and desired Oriana's change of mood ; that it had come was clear. She began by asking whether Blanche had had any talk alone with Daalgaard.

"Not during the last few days."

"Nor have I—" said Oriana in a low voice ; then she added with an attempt at a casual tone :—"Will he think I have changed?"

"He has seen you nearly every evening."

"We have never been alone."

There was a short silence ; then Blanche said gently :—"I think you are needlessly alarmed. One day he will know your situation, and understand it—meanwhile—"

"Well ?"

"He believes that M. de Marécourt is still attached to his—to Mme de Freysac. After all, they left for Paris together."

Oriana paused in her walk and looked oddly at her friend ; she gazed across the terraces ; then she said coolly :—

"He is still attached to her. He came to me because he was afraid of making things difficult for them both."

Blanche now recalled the conversation she had overheard on the day of Aymon's departure ; she repeated it, ending with :—"I did not understand what he meant—I did not wish to."

"No ? Perhaps you don't understand anything that is going on—" said Oriana rather wearily.

"I think I have shrunk from it. I am beginning to feel that that is wrong."

There was another pause. Blanche wondered if Oriana was going to avail herself of the hint ; she spoke at last with her eyes on the ground.

"Do you remember what you told me about that little boy called Lawrence—your friends' little boy ?"

"Lawrence Marchant ? Yes—"

"You told me he was too delicate to go to school till he was

twelve—when he went he was like a girl or a baby. But he liked it—he—what was it you said?—it made a man of him. Do you remember?"

"That was not an expression to be taken literally—it—"

"I know. I only meant—that was like Aymon—she has been his school—" said Oriana in a matter-of-fact voice.

There was a very long silence. Blanche was conscious of confusion, annoyance and disgust. She muttered something and Oriana took her up quickly.

"We won't talk about it—but it is something you should understand about her. I used to think she was old, and unimportant. Now I know how silly I was."

"If she—if he goes back to her—" Blanche faltered, and then stopped, appalled by Oriana's expression; it was one of fear and revulsion: suddenly she buried her face in her hands. Blanche touched her on the arm and felt her tremble. "Perhaps we had better let it alone—" she suggested.

Oriana got out her handkerchief and wiping her face, began to walk on slowly; her cheeks were smeared and flushed, her lips compressed. She said in a spent voice:—

"He may go back. I expect he will. I shall be—what he has made me. Nothing can alter that."

"But none of this is your fault—"

"O! what does it matter whose fault it is? It's my father's, that I was ever born, I suppose—I didn't know—till Aymon came back, and—but you wouldn't understand how I hate myself for—"

For a few minutes Oriana continued to speak in a halting and convulsive tone. Through the tortured phrases Blanche perceived a complexity and violence of temperament that she had guessed at but never fully realised. The process of comprehension was painful. The fact that this girl, not yet nineteen, loathed herself, not for her wifely submission, but for her involuntary response to a man she despised, was not to be faced for more than a blinding second or two; Blanche murmured something that was meant to be sympathetic: Oriana perceived the withdrawal, and the moment passed. The revelation was unforgettable. But it could be relegated—and it was.

The Duchesse de Roncesvaulx was expected to dinner for the first time since her illness; Daalgaard was therefore absent, much

to Blanche's relief. Oriana was composed, although more silent than usual. Aymon was in high spirits and very attentive to her. During the course of the meal he described a sale he had attended in Paris where he had bought a pair of bleu-du-roi Sévres vases, and also a statue of Persephone which he proposed to place at the end of the swimming-bath. After dinner the ladies must inspect these purchases ; then they might all walk down to the pool with a view to deciding on the position of the statue.

The Duchesse de Roncesvaulx excused herself. "But Mademoiselle will sit with me—" she added graciously, "while you young people make your decision. Be sure to take a wrap, my child—" smiling at Oriana—"It is apt to be chilly down there at this hour."

Oriana was sitting at the head of the table. She said nothing; then she put her hand up to her throat, as if the filigree necklace Aymon had brought her from Paris was too tight. At this point the iced pudding, which had already made the round of the table, was offered her once more. She stared at it in silence. The footman, who was young and nervous, stood holding the heavy silver dish towards her.

"Put it down—" said Oriana at last in an almost inaudible tone. The youth hesitated ; it was clear that he had not heard her.

Oriana lifted her head and glared at him. "Take it away—put it down, can't you ?" she exclaimed.

The major-domo stepped forward. The footman turned, slipped on the marble floor and let the dish fall to the ground.

The crash was succeeded by an instant's silence. Oriana's glance had followed the accident ; now she was staring fixedly at the mess of pistachio and orange cream. Then, pointing to it, she began to laugh, on a harsh, high-pitched note ; she flung herself back in her chair, shaking and gasping.

Aymon sat in his place, his mouth slightly ajar. His mother began to expostulate. It was Blanche who picked up a carafe of water and threw its contents across the table in Oriana's face, exclaiming :—"Stop that at once, do you hear ? Stop it, I say !" Then she got up and came round the table, preparing for the final antidote, a smart blow on the cheek. It was not needed. With a sob Oriana collapsed just as Blanche's arms came round her.

By this time Aymon was on her other side, a glass of wine

in his hand. Blanche took it from him, half lifting his wife's limp figure with one arm.

A few moments later Blanche and Aymon had carried Oriana to her room ; here, with some difficulty, Blanche persuaded him to abandon the part of the anxious husband while she partially undressed Oriana and put her on the sofa, covering her feet with a shawl ; she breathed deeply once or twice and then opened her eyes. As Blanche bent over her, she said in a hoarse thick voice :—

“Don’t let him come in—you won’t, will you ?”

Blanche shook her head. Very soon she was able to leave Oriana with her maid ; a quarter of an hour later she rejoined her with the assurance of solitude. Aymon, rather pleased than otherwise by the evidence of his wife’s sensibility, had promised not to try and see her till the morning. He asked nothing better than that she should be in Blanche’s hands ; as she took up her post in Oriana’s dressing-room the memory of his smile made it plain that he saw the fit of hysterics as a personal tribute to his attentions.

At about ten o’clock the sleeping potion began to take effect ; it was possible to watch Oriana without any danger of rousing her, and Blanche sat down by the bed. Oriana was lying on one side, her knees drawn up, her face half buried in the pillow, a cascade of unpinned curls escaping from her nightcap to fall over her cheek and chin. Her forehead was damp, her breathing heavy and regular.

As she looked down at that diminished figure, huddled in a confusion of lace-edged sheets and crumpled pillows, Blanche felt a strange and painful remorse—for what, she could not tell. Sleep had blurred the surface brilliance of Oriana’s beauty, substituting an appeal to all that was protective and maternal in the older woman. She pulled the sheet over the hunched shoulder, and softly left the room. Then she walked the whole length of the gallery and so reached Daalgaard’s sitting-room door.

Her knock was answered in a low abstracted tone ; she stepped quietly into the room, to find herself in an outer ring of shadow, beyond which she saw Daalgaard’s bent head under a lamp. He was working at his accounts ; there were papers and ledgers on either side of his slowly moving hand. So removed and tranquil was the picture thus presented that for a moment Blanche felt as if she had opened an illustrated book. She stepped forward.

He looked up ; then he started to his feet and came round the table.

"Is anything wrong ? What has happened ?"

Blanche shook her head.

"Is she—what—"

"Oriana is asleep, and in bed. She was not very well at dinner. If there had been anything to worry about I should have let you know before now—" said Blanche, rather surprised at her own words. "I came to talk to you about her. May I sit down ?"

Daalgaard pulled forward a chair ; he faced her, leaning against the table. Now she saw that he looked tired and pale, but not unhappy ; there was a great difference between his patient weariness and Oriana's feverish exhaustion.

"I am sorry to have startled you—" Blanche began, "I will tell you as briefly as I can what is in my mind."

He seemed to have regained his usual quiet manner ; he said in a low voice :—

"Please tell me what happened at dinner."

"Oriana was overwrought—she had a slight nervous attack, and went to bed early."

"A nervous attack—what exactly does that mean ?"

"One of the footmen dropped a dish, and it startled her. I assure you she is quite well. It was not even a question of sending for the doctor."

There was a pause. Daalgaard was staring in front of him.

"She is unhappy—" he said at last.

"I think she is. That is natural. It is in fact what I came to speak to you about."

He leant forward, one hand over his eyes, as if to blot out the picture she had created ; she heard a muffled sound ; then he got up abruptly and walked away. His back towards her, he said with a touch of his sardonic manner :—

"What do you propose ?"

"The position is an impossible one for her—" Blanche began in a firm tone, "She cannot adapt herself to concealment and intrigue for long—it is not in her nature."

She paused, considering her next words. He said :—

"I remember—you said that once before, and I did not believe it."

"On the day of your accident ?"

"Yes - it seems a long time - I'm sorry—" he stopped, adding with a sudden change of tone :—"What were you going to say?"

"You will think that I am taking a great deal on myself. I know it, I am prepared to accept the responsibility."

"Please go on."

His tone was exceedingly grim. She exclaimed :—

"You should not condemn me unheard!"

Daalgaard turned and looked round the room, then at Blanche. She went on :—"I know—I know what you feel. Your position—" She resumed more steadily :—"It seems to me that one should think of what is right—rather than of what is usual or expedient, in such a situation as this."

He said nothing. He was looking at her with cold intentness. Blanche said :—

"For what it is worth, I have decided to tell you what I believe to be the right course." She waited ; still he did not speak, nor did his face lighten. "Please tell me to go, if you think—if I—"

He shook his head ; he seemed unable to answer at once ; when he did it was in a more composed and thoughtful manner. "You are the only friend she has. Please tell me what is in your mind."

It was not a very helpful opening ; but Blanche decided to take it, in spite of her rising nervousness. "Young people should not live in the present, Captain Daalgaard. It leads to wrong thinking and selfishness. Oriana should have happiness to look forward to, however remote. There is none in her present situation."

"And you blame me for that?"

Blanche shook her head, and went on in her quietest, most deliberate tone :—

"You must take her away from here—not immediately, but soon. I shall help you. I have thought out exactly what I can do."

CHAPTER 4 *Holding the Shears*

BLANCHE continued to speak for a few minutes without any of the timidity or hesitation that had marked her introductory phrases. By the time she finished she had regained most of the

confidence that Daalgaard's unresponsive aspect generally undermined ; indeed she was in danger of forgetting him, except as an adjunct to the story.

A short silence succeeded her return to the inmediate present. He deliberated a moment and then said :—

“What made you come to this decision ?”

“I thought I had already told you.”

“Not very long ago you mentioned annulment—do you no longer think it feasible ?”

“Not—not exactly—” said Blanche, forcing herself to meet his glance, “It might be considered later.”

“I see. Does your Italian friend know of this scheme ?”

“Not yet.”

“She has never heard of me ?”

“No—but—”

“What makes you think she is likely to employ someone of whom she knows nothing personally ?”

“That would take rather a long time to explain. One reason is that she wrote to me the other day about the difficulties her husband was having over the management of the Apulian property. It is work in which you are already experienced—very much what you do here—and then you speak Italian fluently—and—”

“Surely she would prefer to employ a steward of her own nationality ?”

“Honoria Mazarotti is English. I have known her for several years. I was to have stayed with her in Rome last winter.”

After a moment's silence Daalgaard said :—“And you believe that she would accept my—a runaway couple ?”

Blanche looked rather confused. “That is a question of how it is presented. I think if I were to explain—”

“She is an admirer of your novels ?”

“Yes.”

He looked at her with a faint smile, as if he were trying to reassure both her and himself. “I know—all these questions sound ungracious. If I were not completely bewildered—helpless—” he broke off, thrust his hands in his pockets and stared at the ground.

Embarrassed, Blanche sat in silence ; she was determined to

say no more until he did. He looked up after what seemed a very long time, began a sentence, shrugged his shoulders and gave a brief unpleasant laugh, as if he despised himself for his inadequacy. She had neither taken for granted nor even expected gratitude : but this tortured constraint seemed to her almost as painful to witness as to endure. She realised that Daalgaard's feeling for Oriana had reached a point where discussion of it, however necessary, was unbearable ; his inability either to possess or to protect her in the practical sense a source of deep and constant self-disgust. Now Blanche must wait till he had collected enough strength to give her the signal to go on. When he did, he had mastered his voice.

"You offer me a great deal—all I ever dreamed—but that's not—" he stopped and then added harshly :—"She—she loses—for her it's different—I—"

"I am offering you, through my friend, independence and employment. And you underrate what Oriana missed until she met you—" Blanche put in gently.

"No—" said Daalgaard with stubborn bitterness, "I see her more clearly than you do, that's all."

"You're a little biased—are'n't you?"

There was a pause ; Daalgaard frowned as if he were puzzling out his next phrase.

"Do you believe—" he said at last, "in stripping someone of—of everything they—" he stopped again ; then he said almost inaudibly :—"It's no use—I can't talk about it sensibly. But she wouldn't be happy—I've had time to realise that, these last days."

Blanche waited for a moment ; then she got up.

"I know that you are wrong—" she said in the measured, hypnotic tone she employed rarely but effectively with Oriana. "I know that in this case the passion of love is stronger than the others." She paused, and then continued in a more ordinary, reassuring tone :—"Don't let us discuss it any further—just give me your permission to write to my friend—it need not commit you to anything you think inadvisable. She wants a responsible steward, and you may be prepared to take the post—need I say more?"

There was another, shorter silence ; then :—

"Thank you—" said Daalgaard in an extinguished voice.

He got up and went back to his desk ; he glanced mechanically

at the papers in front of him. Blanche moved to the door ; he looked at her and said in an even voice :—

“Do you know—you’re very remarkable—I think by far the most remarkable person I’ve ever had to deal with.”

The words had an unpleasant sound ; Blanche considered them as coolly as she could ; as the struggle between pique and surprise appeared obvious, he came towards her and said quickly :—

“Please forgive me—you’ve always been very kind.”

“That’s not—I try to do what is right. It’s not always possible.”

He looked at her thoughtfully, and at last she saw a trace of the friendliness for which she had been hoping.

“Did you not tell me that your father was a pastor of the Church of England ?”

“Yes.”

“He must have been over-strict—to make you so liberal.”

Blanche shook her head. “In all my life I only twice failed to follow his advice.” She added :—“He *was* remarkable—I wish you had known him. You might hear some people speak of him as a rebel—I know he was a leader.”

“I see. But—would your father have thought it right to lead a girl of eighteen to break her marriage vows ?”

“He would have thought, as I do, that a marriage of convenience is without sanctity, as without obligations.”

Daalgaard’s expression had been grave to severity ; now there was a flicker of the faintest amusement, immediately suppressed.

The memory of the adulterous victim of Upper Mellsham had suddenly returned to Blanche, more vividly than for many years ; partly with a view to distracting her companion, partly in overwhelming loyalty and fondness, she recounted that village drama of her childhood and the effect it had had on her. Daalgaard listened without comment ; then he asked if she had told Oriana the story.

“No—it is not a story for a young girl”— replied Blanche absently, still absorbed in her memories ; she looked up to see him smiling, and added in some confusion :—“I mean—she would not understand its real significance.”

“Perhaps not—but I have heard her speak of your father almost as if she knew him. It’s curious”—he paused.

“That she should be impressed ?”

“No—everything you tell her makes an impression. It’s odd

to hear her repeat your father's theories—for now I see they were his as they are yours—as if they were her own. They're rather startling—" he glanced round the room—"in these surroundings."

His voice had the intonation she often heard him use in speaking of Oriana ; he seemed to be thinking aloud as he continued :—"I don't think this—liberality—goes very deep though."

Blanche said nothing ; she was afraid of calling up the self-directed acrimony that had broken off the beginning of their conversation. She waited, hoping that he would continue to speak in this milder tone of what he cared for most ; and soon he did so.

"Some people reflect a spiritual or a moral atmosphere like a pool of water—the scene changes, and the belief goes."

He moved towards the table and fingered the papers in front of him ; he sat down and continued in the same quiet, brooding tone :—

"I believe that I should do her no harm in depriving her of her faith, such as it is. What she cannot do without is—" he tapped the ledgers—"all that this implies—wealth, luxury, fine taste—rich food—" he smiled, as if he were recalling some comical yet engaging example of Oriana's behaviour ; then he added :—

"In my country beauty is too often merely accidental—I suppose that's why I—what I mean is, she always from the very first moment made me think of everything that is useless and delicate and expensive. Any room in this house might have been designed for her—just like her jewels and her dresses, even her boxes of marrons glacés. It's not only that I can't think of her without them—she is a part of the life they make for her—"

Suddenly he seemed aware of his audience ; he looked at Blanche with a return to his defensive expression. "Forgive me, Mademoiselle—why should you have to listen to this ?"

Blanche resolved to speak firmly. "I understand your point of view. But it seems to me sentimental—and false."

"O—why ?" said Daalgaard, apparently unmoved. She met his glance, and went boldly on.

"All that you say is true—she is of course the product of her surroundings, thoughtless, idle, untrained. But she is young enough to rise above them if she were given the chance to do so."

He smiled rather sadly ; a little irritated, Blanche went on :—

"Do you really believe that she should be nothing but a piece of ornamentation—just so long as her beauty lasts?"

"No—but I think it would have been better for her if she—that is, if you—"

"Please go on."

"I am afraid you will be offended. I did tell you once before what I believe your influence to have been. If she had not succumbed to it—"

"She would not have fallen in love with you—is that what you mean?"

"Something like it, yes."

"Then, even if that were so, she would have missed her chance of happiness."

Avoiding her eye, he got up and began to walk about again. A few moments passed; when he spoke his voice had lost all its gentleness.

"How is it that I appear so desirable?"

"Because you bring out all that is good and womanly in her," said Blanche in a low voice.

"And so you have decided—"

"Captain Daalgaard—you are unfair."

"Are you absolutely sure that this is the right thing for her?"

"Yes."

A long silence followed. Blanche dared not look up again; she was aware that he glanced at her in passing as he went over to the window and drew up the curtain.

"It's very late—" she said mechanically—"I must go."

Daalgaard turned, his hand still on the curtain, and their eyes met; then he said in his tone of mild irony:—

"I wonder if you know who your prototypes are?" As Blanche shook her head he went on:—"The Parcae—Norns, we call them, where I come from."

"What do you mean?" Blanche exclaimed.

"One wove the thread, one tangled it—don't you remember?" He paused and then added with a quizzical glance:—"You seem to be holding the shears at the moment."

Blanche shook her head with a smile. "You're very difficult to—to deal with, was your expression, wasn't it? You always end by making fun of me."

"I assure you—"

"Well, never mind. I may write to the Marchesa? That is agreed?"

As she turned at the door she saw that he had grown rather pale. "Yes—please—" he said in the cold constrained tone she so much dreaded; he went on, forcing out the words:—

"You know—I have a brother in the United States—I have not heard from him since the war—their war."

"Has he been there long?"

"Nearly seventeen years. He took up farming and stock-breeding—now—" he broke off and shrugged his shoulders.

"I suppose that it is possible to do well there, even in war-time—" Blanche suggested.

"Not in our family—" replied Daalgaard with his slight bitter smile. "But I have written to my brother—he wanted me to join him when my mother died."

"I remember—that was when you—"

He interrupted her in a rapid, vehement tone. "Wait a moment—does she—have you spoken to her about this?"

Blanche shook her head.

"Then—could you help me to see her alone—so that I can tell her about it myself?"

"You don't trust me?" said Blanche, smiling.

"Please—let me tell her. I want her to realise—" he stopped, and she saw that his lips were trembling.

"I will try to arrange it—"

"If you do—if you think it is better for her—I need not see her without you."

"Whether I am there or not, I think it best you should tell her yourself. I will let you know—" and Blanche left the room.

It was not possible for the lovers to see one another alone for several days. During that time Blanche had to listen to Oriana's complaints of Daalgaard's neglect, her doubts of his affection; she repeated nothing of their talk, except that he had asked for an interview. Oriana's face cleared; she said curiously:—

"And you said you would let him know?" Blanche nodded.

"You've changed, haven't you?"

"Changed?"

"You told me you wouldn't have anything to do with a--an intrigue."

Blanche made no reply. The discrepancy between that first declaration and her present behaviour was perfectly justifiable in her own eyes ; but this was not the moment to explain it.

Two days later Mme de Freysac returned from Paris, and with her arrival the atmosphere lightened considerably. Her presence completed the Comte de Marécourt's metamorphosis ; it was plain that he felt himself rightly placed at last between a wife and a mistress, neither of whom gave him any trouble. Aware that before long Zoë de Freysac must find out the relationship between Oriana and Daalgaard, Blanche hurried to find him the first evening she and her pupil were alone. Oriana was in the library ; they could expect no more than an hour's solitude ; then, if Aymon returned early, it would be to find them all three waiting up for him.

When at the appointed time Blanche entered the library, Oriana ran across the room and embraced her. The next few moments were embarrassing for the older woman ; she had not expected this tearful ecstasy ; she deprecated thanks, trying to see behind Oriana's hectic welcome something of the sober determination she considered desirable and fitting.

Then she glanced over Oriana's head at Daalgaard and saw in his face the change she had too often presupposed. Here, at last, doubts and scruples had given way to a radiant and tremulous hopefulness ; the simplicity, the sanguine conclusions of eighteen had overborne the glooms and the self-depreciation of thirty-five. It was as if he saw Oriana in a ring of fiery light : dazzled and wondering, he continued to gaze speechlessly at her until she left Blanche's arms and came to take his hand ; then he was able to speak, though in a stumbling, hesitant way that made his words the undercurrent to the women's easier communication. Some further talk of the future was necessary ; before long Oriana broke into it with :—

"We can never, never thank you enough ! I'll never be cross and hateful again—I do love you, Blanche darling."

"I have only made a suggestion—you must not count on its being accepted—" said Blanche with a smile.

"O ! I daresay if the Marchesa doesn't want him you'll think of someone else—you will, won't you ?"

"Well—I don't—"

"O ! you will, I'm sure of it—when do you think you will get the answer ?"

"Not for a fortnight, at the earliest— "

"And then—"

"Suppose we all sit down and discuss it reasonably—" Blanche suggested.

Oriana agreed ; but she could not sit still for more than a moment. She sprang up and glided over to the window, then came back to perch on the arm of Blanche's chair. Daalgaard turned to Blanche and said in an odd, shaken voice :—

"It seems that I was wrong."

"Wrong ? About me ?" from Oriana.

"Yes. I thought—but I still believe it's impossible to make you understand what it's like to be poor."

"Indeed it's not !" Oriana exclaimed. "Hasn't Blanche told you what I was like at Yssimbault ? But I told you—don't you remember ?"

"Running wild isn't quite the same thing—" said Daalgaard absently, his eyes on her glowing face.

"But I shall be with you—"

He got up as if he could not trust himself to go on looking at her, and she broke off, a little bewildered. Blanche took Oriana's hand, and said gently :—

"It's not only that—unless your husband sets you free to marry again, your position will be a difficult one."

"I know—we've talked about that—" said Oriana rather impatiently.

"Well—will you try to think about it—seriously ?"

Oriana nodded ; then she went over to Daalgaard and whispered something ; he put his hands on her shoulders and stared into her upturned face ; she flung her arms round his neck. A moment or two later he disengaged himself. Then he said to Blanche in a low voice :—

"I've done my best—I said everything I could think of."

"As if I cared about—about *things*—" Oriana expostulated,

looking up at him—"or people—except Blanche—" she added, with her sudden high-pitched laugh.

Daalgaard held her at arm's length and looked at her in half-serious deliberation ; he said in that odd, uncertain voice :—

"Have you worn that dress before to-day ? I don't remember it."

"No—it came yesterday—do you like it ?" said Oriana, glancing down at her chestnut poplin, trimmed with white moiré ribbons ; she wore a turquoise necklet, bracelet and earrings, and a number of diamond rings.

"How many more times will you wear it before it goes to your maid ?"

Oriana swung her skirts and laughed. "I know what you want me to say—but you see, I've got far too many dresses to have to think about new ones for years and years."

"What if the fashions changed ?" Daalgaard enquired gravely.

"O ! then I could have them altered—some, at least—people do do that, you know—" said Oriana, as if explaining some remote and savage custom.

"I see."

Oriana looked at her free hand ; then she said in a surprised tone :—

"Of course ! I can wear paste jewellery."

Daalgaard's face darkened a very little ; then he began to smile. "Are you going to have all your parures copied before we leave ?"

"Well—I might—but what I meant was, my jewels are worth a great deal—if I were to sell them, we should have plenty of money."

There was a moment's silence. Oriana gazed at the ceiling ; she appeared to be beginning a mental inventory. Then, as if conscious of some change in his glance, she looked again at Daalgaard, who was still smiling.

"Do you really think that would be a good plan ?" he asked.

"I don't particularly care about real jewels—" Oriana went on, absorbed in her scheme. "Now—the diamonds my father gave me cost—"

"I'm afraid it won't do, you know—" he interrupted in a perfectly amiable tone.

"How do you mean ? We needn't sell them till we get to—to Italy—" said Oriana, her voice softening at the last word.

He continued to gaze at her, still apparently rather amused ; she began to look uneasy.

"What do you want me to do, then ?" she asked.

"Anything you like—you can throw them into the sea, or give them to one of your maids—so long as they're left behind."

"Left behind ? But they're mine—I can do what I like with them—you—"

"I'm afraid you're wrong. I don't intend either of us to live on your jewellery," said Daalgaard pleasantly.

There was a pause.

"I can wear it, I suppose—" said Oriana rather sulkily.

"I don't think so. It might give the wrong impression."

"But they're *mine*—why can't I—"

"Oriana—" expostulated Blanche in a low voice.

"But I don't understand ! I've always—what would be wrong about wearing my own rings and bracelets—the jewels my father gave me ?"

"They were given to the future Comtesse de Marécourt—" said Blanche, as Daalgaard remained silent and apparently unperturbed. "And besides—where you will be—if the Marchesa—"

Oriana interrupted triumphantly :—"You mean she might be annoyed because they'll be better than hers ? Of course I needn't wear them when—" she turned to Daalgaard. "Is that what you mean ?"

He shook his head. Oriana's eyes opened very wide, and her lip trembled. "Then—"

"Suppose that I had arrived at Marécourt with a lady—wouldn't you have thought it rather strange if she had a quantity of historic jewellery ?"

"But we're talking about *me*—and I *don't* want to wear dozens of rings and necklaces—I mean to sell them, don't you see ?"

Daalgaard laughed. Oriana flushed hotly, and burst out :—

"You're not to make fun of me—you—"

"Do you really imagine I'm going to live on your diamonds ?"

"It's not only—"

"Well, pearls, rubies, anything you have. You know there's a name for that sort of person ?"

"But—but everything I have is—you—I think you're very unkind—"

He looked at her for a moment ; he made no attempt to move towards her ; then he said quietly :—

“I’m afraid I was right, after all—you don’t understand that everything will be different. Perhaps having no jewels will be the worst part of it—will you be very unhappy without them ?”

Oriana sniffed. “I shall feel rather queer.”

This naïve admission was too much for Daalgaard ; he gave an exclamation and took her in his arms ; then he got out his handkerchief and began to wipe her eyes. “Don’t cry, my darling—don’t—” Blanche heard him murmur ; the rest was inaudible.

Oriana still looked bewildered and distressed ; he sat down and drew her on to his knee, one hand clasping both of hers ; then he threw Blanche an imploring look : she nodded and withdrew.

This time she dared not absent herself for more than a quarter of an hour. Five minutes after she returned to the library they were joined by Aymon, who was delighted to find an audience. He upbraided Charles Daalgaard in his most finicking manner.

“Upon my word, you seem to avoid me, except when there’s work to be done ! If you neglect these ladies, I shall have to speak for them—” he declared.

Daalgaard glanced at Blanche ; he did not look at Oriana, who had taken up her embroidery-frame and was working busily. “I have been pressed for time over these accounts—” he said formally. “If you will excuse me, I think I—”

“I won’t have it, my dear fellow ! I came back early in the hope of finding you here—I’ve missed our pleasant evenings. I insist on your staying—and Mme de Marécourt will sing to us,” said Aymon, beaming.

Daalgaard, however, was firm. When he had left the room his employer, with the first sign of peevishness he had shown since his return, remarked on his wife’s ungracious manners. “You will make poor Daalgaard feel that he’s unwelcome—” he said sharply.

Oriana shrugged her shoulders. Aymon looked from one to the other of the two ladies and began another protest which he turned into a short homily on suitable behaviour to inferiors who were, he explained, more vulnerable to social slights than persons of breeding.

CHAPTER 5 *A Metamorphosis and a Suggestion*

"YOU know—" said Oriana, stretching out a hand for the box of sweets at her bedside, "I shan't be sorry to stay up here for a little while."

Dr Dupuy had just left ; his verdict, that Oriana was suffering from nervous fatigue, had been given inscrutably and without any enquiries into her activities. The fact that a second and more prolonged hysterical attack soon followed the first had resulted in his recommending a week's rest in one room, either in bed or on the sofa, light diet and a course of mild sedatives. Too much solitude was not desirable : and so Blanche, with only one maid, was to be Oriana's companion ; M. de Marécourt might visit his wife, morning and evening, for not more than half an hour.

Now Blanche expressed surprise at her charge's docility. Oriana raised herself on her pillows and stared out of the window.

"The weather has broken—" she said absently, "I should not have been able to bathe without—I mean, if the gardeners knew I had been down there—"

"Have you been meeting him there at night?"

"Yes."

"Not since M. de Marécourt came back from Paris?"

Oriana looked impassively at Blanche before she answered. "In the morning, as soon as it was light. Aymon doesn't leave me till after midnight, usually."

Blanche got up and walked over to the window ; she had visualised and was now prepared to accept the darker byways of intrigue ; but to hear them so coolly recapitulated gave her a feeling of repulsion. Oriana's voice followed her softly.

"I shouldn't have spoken of it—don't be angry with me."

"You still talk like a child sometimes—" said Blanche without turning round. "Suppose—what if someone had seen you? Your husband—"

"He would have shut his eyes—just as I'm supposed to shut mine—" said Oriana, in a faintly contemptuous tone.

"How can you—"

"You're always saying that. I can, and I do, that's all."

"I blame myself—partly—" said Blanche, after a pause.

"Do you? All the same, I know you'll go on helping us—won't you?"

"You seem to be quite sure—"

"When you begin to do something, Blanche, you always go on with it. As soon as you hear from—from Italy—"

"You should not count on that—"

"I don't. But if she says no, you'll think of something else. It's like—do you remember telling me once how difficult it was to make out the end of a love-story?"

Blanche turned and stared. "That has nothing to do with—"

"Nothing, really. But isn't all this like a story sometimes?"

"What nonsense you're talking!" Blanche exclaimed irritably, "I'm not a writing machine—I don't confuse you with the people in my novels."

"I didn't mean—I only thought—"

"You should not let your thoughts run on those lines, Oriana. Do you think of yourself as the heroine of a romance?"

"No—I'm not in the least like one—" said Oriana with a smile.

Blanche came over to the bed and stood looking down at her pupil in silence. "And Captain Daalgaard says I influence you—" she remarked ironically. "You've made up your mind about everything—only I'm to do it all."

"Don't you want to?"

"It's not a question of what I want, but of what's right—I've told you that a dozen times."

"I know—only Charles says that with you, it's the same thing."

"That's extremely—"

"Don't be angry with him. He admires you—he says you're—"

"You had better keep his opinions on my character to yourself, I think—" Blanche interrupted coldly.

"O! very well—but there is one thing he asked me to tell you."

"What is that?"

"He doesn't want you to think he's ungrateful. You see—he doesn't realise it—but he's not like other people."

"I thought that might be so—" said Blanche, beginning to smile.

Oriana considered a moment; then, pushing the hair away from

her forehead, she began to pleat the crumpled frills of her nightcap, which she had as usual pulled off and tossed aside.

"What is it that makes him different?" continued Blanche, returning to the low chair at the bedside.

Oriana ignored the teasing intonation; she said simply:—"It's his illness. Perhaps it's rather hard to understand if you don't know him as I do."

She paused and then went on in the same direct and thoughtful manner:—"He's quite well now—except for a bit of his mind. There's one part of it that's painful and raw, just as if—I can't quite explain—he were still lying in the hospital." She raised her head and looked enquiringly at her companion.

"I can partly understand that—won't you explain a little more?"

"Well—all that—his being beaten in the battle, and—and wounded—you know—has made him hate people doing things for him—even when he likes them as he does you. And truly he does, Blanche—just because he makes fun sometimes, he doesn't mean—" Oriana waited, and was reassured before she continued:—"You see, everyone, since that time, has pitied him and—he couldn't explain it all, even to me—but I understand it, don't you?"

Blanche nodded; unaware of her friend's altered expression, Oriana added:—

"First there were the people at the hospital—then his cousin—" her voice hardened—"and then Aymon. You see? Everyone—I remember even Mlle Marie Riquet-Toustain wanting to give him money, and saying how unfortunate he was."

"He lost everything—" Blanche put in.

"Everything—even what he stood up in. His uniform had to be cut off him and burnt. Zoë de Freysac bought him a suit of clothes. He had a louis and ten francs in his pocket when he left the hospital. And the Prussians have given his house and farm to someone else. He had a letter about that soon after he came here."

There was a short silence. Oriana was looking in front of her. She said quietly:—

"I shall never be able to give him anything—that's the only thing that makes me sad sometimes. Not a ring—nor a purse, nor a watch-guard, even if I made it myself."

The thought of those unaccustomed fingers struggling with

silks and needles was somehow not laughable at that moment. Blanche said gently :—

“Perhaps later on—”

“O ! it’s foolish to mind such a little thing. Later on—when we’re always together—but I’m—that’s what worries me.”

“Naturally, as things are now—”

“O ! I don’t mean that. Suppose we do get the right answer from your friend—I’m so afraid—we shall have to be very careful.”

“Careful ?”

“Yes. You see—just *because* he wants to be with me and away from this place more than anything in the world—he may say he can’t accept another favour.”

Blanche’s increasing astonishment at the total change in Oriana’s attitude towards her own hopes drowned the instinctive protest ; she gazed speechlessly at her companion’s judging and preoccupied expression. “What would you do, if he did refuse ?” she said, after a short silence.

“I don’t know. I think—just pretend not to mind very much. That would give him time to get over the feeling.”

Blanche leant back in her chair. “Well, I must say—”

“What ? Can you think of anything better ?”

“I don’t pretend to know him as you do,” replied Blanche rather drily. “It seems to me that you’ve—wouldn’t you be disappointed ?”

“Of course I should. But it wouldn’t do to get in a fuss.”

Blanche drew a long breath ; now more than ever before she felt justified in what she had done ; only the purest affection could have produced so strange and unexpected a metamorphosis. Oriana leaned back on her pillows. After a long silence she said in a contemplative tone :—

“I wonder—if we telegraphed—”

“What—”

“To my people in Paris—do you think they might send me another négligée before the end of the week ? I’m sick of all these old ones.”

Blanche felt rather relieved. “Could we not contrive something ? Haven’t you some family lace put away somewhere ?”

“So I have ! Aymon’s great-aunt’s Valenciennes—” Oriana sat up and tugged at the bell. A few moments later she was conferring with her maid, and Blanche left them together.

During the last months the arrangements for Baudoin de Marécourt's marriage to Stéphanie de Méré had been going forward. Now they were complete, and the wedding was to take place in a week's time. Stéphanie's parents were dead ; she had for some years been living with her great-aunt, the Princesse de Roncesvaulx, whose age and infirmities prevented the celebrations being held in Provence. The young people were therefore to be married from Marécourt ; as soon as Oriana was well enough to come downstairs she had to take up her duties as hostess, this time for a gayer set of visitors than any since her occupation of the Villa. Baudoin, three young men from his regiment and two married couples were the guests of the Comte de Marécourt during this period. His acquaintances in the neighbourhood were also bidden to a series of dinner-parties ; he made no comment when some excused themselves and others (the Caumonts among them) made a brief and formal appearance.

Then, a little sheepishly, Aymon announced his father's return and re-establishment at the Château ; as soon as the Duc de Roncesvaulx appeared in the family circle it was plain that he and Aymon had made up their quarrel. Presently Oriana told Blanche that her father-in-law, while remaining on friendly terms with Mme de Freysac, had accepted defeat at his son's hands as far as her favours were concerned. There was a good deal of talk among the younger male members of the family about this readjustment ; no doubt, thought Blanche bitterly, Aymon regarded it as a triumph and Zoë as an asset. It became his custom during this week of festivities to take two or more of his contemporaries to wind up the evenings at the farm-house, as soon as Oriana and the other ladies had gone to bed.

Blanche was not surprised by Oriana's furious disgust at this tribute to her husband's mistress ; she could picture the scene at the farm-house, the relaxation, entertainment and gaiety that Oriana, socially unsophisticated and ignorant, could never hope to provide ; indeed what chance had she against a hostess who was ready with cards, talk, "little" suppers or music, according to her visitors' mood ? It was to be hoped that Oriana would have enough sense not to complain to Daalgaard of this new demonstration of Zoë's power ; and she did not, until, through Aymon, she heard of her lover's presence at one of his cousin's evenings.

Then it was all Blanche could do to restrain Oriana's jealousy ; she pointed out that Daalgaard's neglect of his cousin might well make her suspicious : it was essential that Zoë should continue to think of Blanche, not Oriana, as attached to him. Oriana jibbed at the deceit ; she was now obsessed with the notion of humiliating her husband's mistress at the cost of her own secret. At last, after a long and stormy interview, Blanche persuaded Oriana not to flout a woman who would not hesitate to use her knowledge of the real situation as unscrupulously and harmfully as possible. Fortunately Oriana's interviews with Daalgaard were now so brief and rare as to preclude much sulking or fault-finding ; but she did express her displeasure at his visiting Mme de Freysac : and he replied that it was impossible for him completely to abandon so intimate a friend.

This was too much for Oriana. She burst into frenzied abuse, to which Daalgaard listened with impenetrable gravity.

"Then—" said Oriana, describing the scene to Blanche, "I said something—I can't remember what, exactly—about his liking to be with her better than with me. 'I suppose you've a lot more in common—' I said. But he didn't answer."

"What happened then ?"

"I said, 'Well, I don't know what you all see in her—because she's hideously plain, and quite *old*'—and do you know what he said then ? O ! dear—I did want to laugh. He said, 'She is the only woman who's warmed your husband's icy blood—that's quite a feat, I should imagine—' wasn't it dreadful ? Of course—" Oriana tossed her head—"I stood up for Aymon."

"What did you say ?"

"I said he'd had *plenty* of mistresses—and Charles laughed—truly, Blanche, I haven't heard him laugh so since—well, for a long time. I was rather angry. But we made it up after that—" she added, smiling to herself.

Blanche tried mentally to re-create this odd dispute, without success ; she supposed that the, to her, brutal coarseness of Daalgaard's rejoinder had been made in a tone of quiet severity ; and she could deprecate but not utterly condemn a turn of phrase which appealed to Oriana's sense of the absurd. But this was dangerous ground. When, O ! when, would the Marchesa's reply relieve the strain ?

As soon as the wedding was over and the guests departed Blanche had time to observe the change in the Duc de Roncesvaulx' demeanour ; it would have been pathetic, if she had been in the mood for pity. He was old and unwanted now, and he knew it ; his manner towards his wife was subservient where it had been merely cool : and the return of Jean Desmarests and his presence at a family dinner-party seemed to crown his depression. Desmarests, apparently unaware of his host's gloomy looks, began to discuss politics. What did Mme la Duchesse think of the Mexican adventure ?

"Adventure is the right word—the whole idea was ridiculous," struck in Aymon superciliously.

The Duchesse de Roncesvaulx gave her son a sharp look and said that the Emperor Maximilian was a man of the highest integrity ; he had left Europe in the interests of the Catholic Church : if he failed—"As he is bound to do—" from Aymon—he would be remembered as a pioneer.

There was a moment's silence ; Jean Desmarests was looking into his wine-glass ; his sallow claw-like fingers slid up and down the stem ; he said :—"What do you think?" turning towards his host.

The Duc de Roncesvaulx cleared his throat and looked portentous ; then he replied :—"You, Monsieur, are better informed than any of us. What do they say in Paris?"

The manufacturer replied :—"I had an interview with what I believe is called a personage—" Aymon assumed an expression of the greatest contempt—"on my way home. I was informed that Bazaine has beaten the Juaristas back to the south." He smiled and waited. "I was further informed that conditions are sufficiently improved to admit of an extension to the diplomatic circle. Monttholon has a vacancy on his staff for a young man of aristocratic family and Conservative principles—would you care for the post?" turning to Aymon.

The Comte de Marécourt leaned back in his chair and laughed theatrically.

"It would be for a term of from three to five years," went on his father-in-law, unmoved.

"Term is the right word," said Aymon, trying to catch Blanche's eye.

"Surely—" said Blanche in the tentative tone that she kept for

these family gatherings, "it would be a great opening for a young man of ability?"

"I daresay it would—" said Aymon languidly. "But you must not take M. Desmarest's suggestions too seriously. He says these things to amuse us."

"Indeed I was perfectly serious—" said Desmarests smoothly. "I spoke of you as embodying all the qualifications required. It might be an experience. There is no doubt that your wife, were you to accept the offer, would be given a position in the Empress's household, at Chapultepec. How do you like the sound of it, Oriana?"

Oriana had been listening attentively. She said with furtive eagerness :—

"I couldn't go—isn't it very damp out there?"

"A beautiful climate—" replied her father blandly. "But I see what it is—young people have no enterprise—in our day --" with a smile and a bow to Roncesvaulx—"we should have jumped at the chance."

His host nodded ; then he said with his uneasy smile :—"You have made them too comfortable here."

"That reminds me—" said Desmarests, as Aymon frowned a little. "You have done great things on the estate. I had a look round on my way here, and spoke to that steward of yours—an able sort of young fellow. Is he a foreigner? He doesn't look—"

"He's a Dane—he found his way here after the invasion, and I gave him the post as soon as I realised how useful he was—" said Aymon quickly. "He will ride round with us to-morrow, with your permission, and show you the improvements himself. I'm glad you liked him."

"Do you find him as capable as you expected?" said Aymon's father in a slightly repressive manner.

"Indeed I do, sir. I should be perfectly happy to leave everything in his hands."

"In that case—" said Desmarests slyly, "you could go to Mexico any time you happened to change your mind."

"I don't think it's likely—" said Aymon coolly, "but if I did, you need have no concern for the property. And that reminds me—he's done so well, that I think of sending him down to Provence

for a month or so—he has everything in order here—and the estate there is in a bad way, from what my brother tells me."

"Could you spare him?"

"Not easily. Everything would fall on me—however—" replied Aymon, with a resigned glance at the ceiling.

Blanche dared not look at her pupil ; she dropped her napkin, and as Aymon bent to pick it up she said uncertainly :—

"Is there—have you a large amount of land in Provence?"

As Aymon began to answer in his affectedly negligent tones she glanced across the table. Oriana's presence of mind had for once not deserted her—or was she mentally stunned ? She took up her glass and drained it, spilling a few drops on her dress. A moment or two later she murmured something about a headache and a bad night after the week's exhaustion. Aymon appeared more impatient than concerned ; he suggested that Blanche should go home with his wife. The sun was beginning to sink as the two women drove back to the Villa.

CHAPTER 6 *Zoë Intervenes*

BLANCHE was never quite sure how it came about that an hour after she had persuaded Oriana to go to bed she was standing under the long low ceiling of the farm-house, Zoë de Freysac opposite her, the empty fire-place between them. "Please sit down, Mademoiselle," said the remembered, dreaded voice : and Blanche could only shake her head, trying to recall the steps that had taken her so far.

She had promised Oriana to look for Daalgaard, whose rooms they had found empty ; then she ventured out into the windy July darkness, with no idea beyond that of waiting in the garden till she saw a light in his windows. Distraught and oppressed by what she had just heard and by the recollection of Oriana's hysterical anxiety, she wandered, she hardly knew how, down the bridle-path leading to the woods that lay between the Villa and the farm-house. Then a drunken peasant frightened her into a run

towards the nearest lighted window : she knocked blindly, and was admitted by the one person above all others whom she wished to avoid.

Now she must make the best of her own foolishness ; she murmured a confused explanation ; Mme de Freysac replied with a gesture of polite dismissal, and said in her most winning tone :—

“If you have come to look for my cousin, he has been gone some time.”

“He is not at the Villa—” said Blanche, hardly taking in her own words.

Zoë de Freysac remained where she was, smiling a little ; as she began to collect herself, Blanche saw that she had been weeping. “I must go—” she muttered, “I should not—I didn’t know—”

“You didn’t know you were so near my house ?”

Stung into recovery by the mocking intonation, Blanche replied with an attempt at dignity :—“I was frightened—I lost my way in the dark, and found myself at your door.”

“What frightened you ?”

“I couldn’t see very well—he must have been drunk—he shouted, and ran after me—” said Blanche with a slight shudder.

There was a pause.

“I noticed some gypsies in the clearing yesterday,” said Mme de Freysac reflectively. “I expect you met one of them on a poaching expedition, and he pretended to be drunk in order to frighten you away.”

“In any case, I must apologise—”

“Please don’t, Mademoiselle. It is I who owe you an apology.” Blanche stared, and her companion went on smoothly :—

“We always seem to meet so opportunely. Won’t you sit down ?”

Blanche looked round. “If you will lend me a lantern, I—”

“I should not dream of letting you go until you are quite recovered. Then my servant will see you home.”

“Thank you—I don’t think—”

“Suppose your friend outside is lying in wait for you ?”

“I must risk that—” said Blanche in a firmer tone ; she was now aware that her knees were beginning to tremble.

“Well, then—suppose I were to tell you something that concerns your young lady and my cousin ?”

There was a long silence while both women looked at one another ; then Blanche sank down by the hearth.

"You see—" continued Mme de Freysac in her slow cool tones, "I know now what a fool I made of myself two months ago, when my cousin was ill. I ought to have guessed what was happening."

"I don't—"

"You let me think that it was you whom Charles was in love with. I must confess—" Mme de Freysac raised her eyebrows a little—"I was—may I say?—rather baffled. You do not think that very rude?"

Blanche stood up. "How much do you know?"

"That he is Mme de Marécourt's lover."

Blanche immediately felt herself more composed. Coolness rose to meet effrontery as she gazed at the speaker, whose bright deep-set eyes had shadows beneath them. Mme de Freysac's hands were in her lap ; now she clasped them together, as if to conceal a possible restlessness ; she added with careful nonchalance :—

"Poor dear Charles !—he's in a state of positive desperation. That sort of thing is painful—so long as it lasts."

"I suppose—" said Blanche slowly, forcing her mind away from her own situation to that implied in the last phrase, "you mean to ruin him ?"

Mme de Freysac shrugged her shoulders. "We don't use the same vocabulary, Mademoiselle. Are you talking of finance, or of the heart ? In any case, why should I want to ruin my cousin ? Please make yourself clear."

A little reassured by the irritated tremor in her companion's voice, Blanche persisted :—"Are you going to tell her husband ?"

"Why should I ? He'll find out soon enough."

"I know you mean to do some mischief."

Mme de Freysac leant back, half closing her eyes. "We could talk so much better if you would sit down—" she murmured.

Blanche hesitated and then obeyed ; it had occurred to her that Zoë de Freysac was quite capable of letting her leave the house without any further information than that she had just received ; while if she stayed, the temptation to wound might produce some link between what she had heard and Aymon's threat of sending Daalgaard to Provence. She waited. Mme de Freysac said in a mild conversational tone :—

"You see, I have not seen my cousin alone for several weeks. Naturally, he has something better to do than to visit me—" she smiled—"and so, when he does, I'm in the habit of telling him any little piece of gossip that I think will amuse him. Quite without any malicious intention I seem to have thrown him into a violent agitation. Poor Charles ! he really has a great deal to put up with."

She paused, looking at Blanche from beneath her lashes ; now her hands were quite steady and so was her voice.

"I told him—in the course of rather an intimate conversation—that M. de Marécourt, some months a husband in name, had now become one in fact—and—"

"You—you told—"

"Ah ! I see you find us horribly coarse—but we're such old friends, my cousin and I. As soon as I mentioned the subject, Charles grew very distressed ; and then, as I reached the climax of this little bit of news, he broke down and gave himself away completely—completely. You can imagine my feelings."

"Yes—I think I can—" said Blanche in a low voice.

"It appears that Mme de Marécourt has been excessively foolish. How could she hope—but perhaps it's unfair to criticise a beginner."

"You say you are attached to Captain Daalgaard," Blanche interposed. "How can you reconcile that with—"

"I was deeply concerned for him, I assure you. To be made a fool of by a girl in her teens—it has been a terrible, an irrevocable shock to him."

"You mean, he won't forgive her ?"

"My cousin is not a character in one of your romances—nor is it a question of forgiveness."

"What is he going to do ?"

Mme de Freysac got up and walked over to the macaw, who was brooding and swaying on his perch in the shadows ; she murmured something and then came slowly back again, looking at her visitor ; when she spoke her voice had an edge to it, and the words came faster.

"He rushed out of this house in the bitterest despair. No doubt he would like to get away from Marécourt as far and as fast

as he can. Unfortunately he's not in a position to do what he wants. He will be at work as usual to-morrow morning."

"I must see him then—" said Blanche after a pause.

"You had much better leave him alone."

"Do you expect me to take your advice?"

"Of course not. But he'll be in no condition to discuss anything for several days. I see that you think I planned this, Mademoiselle —well, I did not."

"No doubt you're delighted—"

"Delighted? To see him breaking his heart for a spoilt baby who can never make him happy? He'll get over it, of course. Meanwhile—" she shrugged her shoulders.

Blanche considered. "He'll never come back to you," she said finally.

Mme de Freysac burst into a laugh, her eyes glittering in her drawn face. "You've made up your mind about that, I suppose?"

"He is in love with her."

"I give it six months—a year, possibly."

Blanche stood up. "I am going home now—" she said frigidly. Mme de Freysac moved forward. "Please do not call anyone, Madame. I have behaved as foolishly as even you could wish. It was partly my fault that your cousin was deceived."

"What a pity you did not enlighten him sooner."

"Yes, it was a pity. Good night, Madame—" replied Blanche calmly, and stepped out into the darkness, her heart too full for personal alarms.

She reached her own rooms to find Oriana waiting up for her. It was not the moment to tell what she had just heard ; and she was saved further talk by the arrival of the Comte de Marécourt, who had been to his wife's room and was annoyed at not finding her there.

Next morning Blanche got up very early with the intention of speaking to Charles Daalgaard before he went out. She was informed that he had risen as soon as it was light and gone to the new stone-quarry, some two miles from the Villa. Blanche left a note for Oriana, breakfasted quickly and ordered the basket-carriage. At half-past eight she was driving through the fields that lay beyond the Villa and reached down to the seashore. As soon as she was within a few minutes' walk of the quarry she dis-

missed the carriage, telling the groom that she would return on foot. She made her way down a narrow valley that widened into shelves of rock on one side and a huddle of fishermen's cottages on the other.

Blanche was pursuing Daalgaard without any very clear idea of what she was going to say to him ; she had a notion that Zoë de Freysac had exaggerated his sufferings with a view to establishing a breach between him and Oriana in theory if not in fact—and she began to throw off the anxiety of the previous night as she picked her way along the path between clumps of vetch and sea-pinks and scattered white pebbles. It was a thunderous, falsely bright morning : a storm was coming up from the sea ; she was glad that in spite of her hurry, she had remembered to bring an umbrella.

As she approached the ravine her breath came faster. She paused before descending the rough path, looking round for Daalgaard : he was not there. Then, lowering her veil against the clouds of white dust, half deafened with the rattle and roar of machinery and falling stone, she made her way towards the nearest workman and asked for Captain Daalgaard.

She had some difficulty in making herself heard, for the noise was now all round her. The young quarryman stared and pointed vaguely behind him ; one or two others turned to gaze at the tall foreign lady in her thick white veil and fluttering cloak. Blanche repeated her question. The youth shook his head and beckoned to one of his fellows.

By this time the delay and the difficulty of making herself heard above the din had jolted Blanche's nerves to a pitch where she found it almost impossible to take in the directions that were now shouted in her ear by another, older workman ; but she perceived, between the rock and the quarry itself, three stone-mason's huts, roofed in and open on one side ; her guide indicated the furthest of these with a gesture ; she pursued her way alone and stepped within.

The enclosure, for it was little more, contained a bench, a table made of planks and two blocks of rough stone ; on the table were a chart and a pair of compasses ; Charles Daalgaard was sitting at it in his shirt-sleeves, his head in his hands. The crash of the falling stone rose between them. Blanche stepped forward, and her shadow fell across the table.

He looked up. Then she saw that Zoë de Freysac had not

exaggerated. He was completely changed. At first he did not seem to recognise her ; then he got up slowly and said something, without removing his eyes from her face. She could not hear what it was.

Long afterwards Blanche recalled that moment as the climax of a nightmare, singular, frightening and horribly real. She gazed dimly at Daalgaard's brown throat and arms, at the blurred outline of his unshaven chin and jaw, the empurpled lids and the angry red marks scored beneath them. She began to say, "I must speak to you—" and realised that she would have to shout to make herself heard. She paused, collecting her strength ; then she came round the table and said loudly and boldly :—

"I saw your cousin last night—you must listen to what I have to say."

Daalgaard backed away and leaned against the wall ; he was breathing quickly : he put his hands behind him. Then he said in a harsh, level voice :—

"There's nothing you can say that I want to hear. Please leave me alone."

Blanche shook her head. As the deadlock grew more apparent she felt resource and resolution increase. The violent sunshine faded and wavered : a cold wind swept in behind her ; she heard a patter of rain on the roof. She put her umbrella against the table and folding her hands said calmly :—

"You must listen to me."

He gave a sound that might have been a laugh. She said in the high, artificial tone that the circumstances enforced :—

"I can't speak to you here—where can I see you?"

He said nothing : he continued to stare at her. Blanche exclaimed :—"This is impossible !—you—" she broke off as the man who had just shown her the way came into the hut.

There was a few moments' colloquy ; then the foreman went out and Daalgaard looked across at her with the faintest return of his sardonic expression ; she took it to mean a further and more definite refusal. She hesitated, considering a last appeal. Then the noise outside changed from a harsh, continuous roar to an intermittent rattling ; a moment later it died away altogether. She moved nearer Daalgaard, trying to thank him. He said :—

"They can't work the engine in this storm. What was it you wanted to say ?"

Just for a moment she thought she saw a gleam of hope in his glance ; then the dull, ravaged look shut down over it once more ; but she was emboldened to speak quickly.

"You think you have been purposely deceived. She was going to tell you. I advised her not to."

As she continued to look at him a lump rose in her throat ; she dropped her eyes.

"What difference—does that make ?"

"When you are able to realise it, all the difference."

He turned his head to the wall. There was a long silence. Outside, the workmen were shouting directions to one another and tramping to and fro. The rain rattled on to the roof in little bursts of metallic sound. Blanche raised her head and looked again at Daalgaard.

His features quivered and crumpled up. He began to cry, desperately and unashamedly. The tears streamed down his cheeks ; he did not wipe them away : he did not cover his face. Blanche said nothing at all.

It seemed to her that he went on crying for a long time ; at last the sobs began to come more faintly and at longer intervals. She heard him mutter something that she could not understand. Then he said thickly :—

"It's no good—everything's gone."

"Indeed, I know how you must feel—" said Blanche, her eyes filling, "but you know—where we love—we can do terrible harm."

"Why didn't she tell me ? That's what I—but it's no use. She didn't, that's all."

"There is no reason—none that would carry any weight—except perhaps that when she's with you she forgets everything else."

He turned and looked at her ; her eyes fell before that helpless misery. She moved away and sat down on a block of stone. It was almost impossible to think coherently ; out of all the half-formed, rejected phrases one recurred, and she gave it utterance.

"I left a note telling her what had happened. You will see her, won't you ?"

He shook his head. "It would be useless."

"Wouldn't it be kinder ?"

"I don't think so. You know that I may be going to Provence?"
 "But not immediately?"

"I can live in the village until I do go."

Blanche waited a moment; then she said quietly:—"I cannot believe that you hate her as much as all that, Captain Daalgaard."

"I don't—hate—"

"You know what the result of your refusing to see her will be?"
 He did not answer.

"She will become desperate. She will do something foolish, and compromise herself irrevocably."

There was another long silence. Daalgaard moved heavily away from the wall and sank on to the bench, staring in front of him. Blanche heard him murmur something that sounded like "I can't—I don't know—". She got up and put her hand on his shoulder; through the thin shirt she could feel him shivering.

"Please give her the chance to speak for herself—" she said gently, "It need not alter what you have made up your mind to do."

He did not reply; but he remained where he was, and she got the impression that he was growing calmer. She went on:—

"Believe me, I know how—how terribly hard it is to feel oneself deceived. But try to think of her for a moment—all this time you have only been able to think of yourself, and your own dreadful unhappiness." Still he did not answer, and she continued:—"You said to her once that she had never grown up. I remember she asked me if you were making fun of her. I think you never realised how deep it goes—she's not only childish, she's not quite humanised in some ways."

"I know that."

"And yet it didn't make any difference to you?"

"I was mad to think we could be happy—I told you—" said Daalgaard in a steadier tone.

"I think you should tell her that yourself, if you really feel it to be true."

He shifted a little; but the firm hand was still on his shoulder, and the low clear voice went on:—

"Forgive me, first. I feel myself responsible for a great deal."

"You've been—it's not your fault—" he muttered.

In the pause that followed Blanche moved away to the front of the hut; she believed that he would soon pull himself together.

Presently she heard him blow his nose. Then he said in a flat dead tone :—

“I’m sorry—I was rude when you first came in.”

“It doesn’t matter”—said Blanche; he caught her glance on his cheek, and said with the faintest return of his peculiar irony :—

“I’m not a pretty sight—I haven’t shaved, and I’ve been drinking brandy. Did you know some was left in my room after I was ill?”

“I’m glad you had something—I—” Blanche began confusedly; she broke off as he dropped his head in his hands; a tear fell from between his fingers. A moment later he looked up and said :—

“It’s all right, Mademoiselle. I’ve finished now. I don’t know why I—”

“O ! please—”

“I want to explain—” he interrupted with sudden volubility, “I’ve been—you mustn’t think I blame her—she can’t help being what she is. I made a mistake, and—she’ll soon forget me. Someone else—”

“You don’t really believe that?”

“Why not? She’s young enough.”

“Of course she might fall in love again one day—but it wouldn’t be the same.”

He went on as if she had not spoken :—“She’s—it’s as if I’d transplanted an orchid or a camellia, and expected it to last for ever—don’t you see? She must stay in her hot-house—” he added in a dreamy detached tone that was more alarming than bitterness or grief.

“It’s too late to say that—you have transplanted her.”

“I thought so. I was wrong.”

There was a moment’s silence; then he said in a cold gentle voice :—

“I couldn’t help falling in love with her—but I should never have told her so.”

“But you did tell her—now she—”

“She fell in love with love, I think—” he interposed, in the same remote exhausted tone. “It’s a habit, like another.”

“What is the point of saying all this to me?” Blanche exclaimed. “Do you expect me to repeat these theories of yours? What am I to say to her?”

He gave her a long look, his expression hardening to impassivity.
“I’ll see her—if you think it’s best.”

“O ! thank you—but you won’t—”

“I’ll try to make her see it as I do. It’s just as well that I’m going away.”

Blanche hesitated a moment, and then said :—“There is one other thing—”

“What is it?”

“Could you—will you try to remember how inexperienced she is?”

“That’s hardly the word I should have used.”

“I mean—” Blanche persisted, ignoring the sneer, “she’s never had a chance—you said that to me yourself, once. Will you try to think of it when you see her?”

There was another silence. “I’ll think of it—” said Charles Daalgaard.

CHAPTER 7 *Melodrama*

TWO days passed before Blanche was able to arrange a meeting between Daalgaard and Oriana ; during that time he was constantly at the Villa in the intervals of riding round the estate with his employer and Jean Desmarests, who had nothing but praise for the work he had done. In the presence of her husband and father he treated Oriana with a remote and tranquil deference ; through Blanche she conveyed to him two notes which were neither answered nor acknowledged.

Meanwhile in her conversations with Blanche Oriana spoke of her lover’s intentions with defiant optimism. “He can’t do that—” she said, after Blanche had described the scene in the hut—“He’s hurt and angry—but you’ll see. I shall make him do what *I* want in the end—” and she repeated, her eyes glittering, “He won’t give me up—I shan’t let him.” But she could neither eat nor sleep during those forty-eight hours, and at the beginning of the third day she retired into her own rooms.

Late that evening Blanche saw Aymon set off for the farm-

house, and summoned Oriana to her sitting-room where Daalgaard was waiting for her. Then she left them together. She had warned him—for by this time Oriana was incapable of attention—that she could not allow them more than two hours.

Near the end of that time Blanche found it impossible to master her own agitation. She stood outside her door trembling from head to foot ; when at last she entered she remained without speaking ; then she looked up and was able to take in the scene.

Daalgaard and Oriana were sitting on a small settee near the french windows, one of which swung to and fro in the wind, the undrawn curtain flapping in front of it. A low stool, on which a lamp and a pink alabaster bowl had been placed, stood in front of the sofa. Oriana was leaning forward, a folded handkerchief in one hand, the other holding Daalgaard's face towards her ; she dipped the cloth in the bowl, wrung it out as well as she was able, and went on bathing his cheek and chin. As Blanche came nearer she saw that the water was stained and cloudy.

"O ! there you are, Blanche—" said Oriana in a preoccupied yet business-like tone, "Now you can hold the lamp for me—I can't see very well."

Hardly understanding the words, Blanche did as she was told. Daalgaard made a slight movement, but he did not look towards her. As she glanced down she saw that Oriana's dress was stained with blood and that there were two or three bits of broken glass on the gilded framework of the sofa. Oriana went on bathing the cut cheek gently and methodically ; then she gave it a careful scrutiny and got up, saying :—

"Do you think I should bind it up for you ?"

"It has stopped bleeding—" said Daalgaard in the same matter-of-fact tone, feeling his face gingerly.

Oriana looked round the room ; her eye caught Blanche's, and she stared coolly at her friend from beneath drooping lids ; her dress and hair were in some disorder ; she glanced down and tried to smooth her pleats and frills ; then, with a shrug of the shoulders, she went towards the door.

"Oriana—" said Daalgaard in a low voice.

She turned, looking back at him. Blanche gazed at her creeping smile and raised eyebrows with heightened astonishment ; it was the first time she had heard him call Oriana by name, and though

his tone was as gentle and unemphatic as usual, she began to feel an inexplicable alarm.

"I want to speak to Mademoiselle alone," said Daalgaard.

Oriana inclined her head; now her eyes were half closed. Suddenly they widened, blazing into a triumphant glare, as she looked at her lover; then she went out, shutting the door noiselessly behind her.

The silence that followed seemed a very long one; Blanche was incapable of breaking it. She replaced the lamp on the mantelpiece and sat down opposite Daalgaard. He was looking at the floor; at last he raised his head and leaning back, said briefly:—

"There's nothing to be concerned about. It's all over."

Blanche looked her question, but did not utter it. He added:—"Our quarrel, I mean—" with a faint lightening of his tone, as if her expression had amused him.

At this point the window clattered and the curtain blew out over the back of the sofa. Daalgaard got up and went round to fasten it; then Blanche saw that one of the panes was broken. He drew the curtain and began to pick up the scattered pieces of glass; when he turned to face her he was holding them in the palm of his hand: he glanced down at them with an odd, puzzled look, as if reminded of something he did not quite understand; then he placed them in a little pile on the table in front of him. By this time Blanche was able to say:—

"Please tell me what has happened."

He waited, his eyes on her face; then he said deliberately:—

"She tried to throw herself off the balcony. I don't know—" he paused—"I didn't wait to think whether she meant it. There was a struggle, and I fell back against the glass."

Blanche tried to speak and failed. Daalgaard sat down on the sofa. Now she saw that his composure was partly the result of an extreme fatigue; his eyes had sunk back into his head and his skin had the livid, yellowish look that she associated with the moment when she had first seen him lying unconscious.

"Why—how could she threaten you with anything so wicked?" she said finally.

"I told her that I was going away, and that we had better not meet until she had had time to forget me—" said Daalgaard in the same toneless, frozen manner. "I told her why. She burst

into tears." He paused. "It all seemed to take a very long time."

"Do you—do you think she really would have thrown—"

"I don't know. No one will ever know."

"When I begged you to see her, I never imagined—"

"No—but you knew I should give in—" he interrupted with a sudden keen glance.

"It seemed to me that she was not entirely to blame."

"It isn't a question of blame—" said Daalgaard, in a tone that reminded Blanche of his cousin's, "I—she made me feel that we were strangers."

"And now?"

He did not answer for a moment or two; then he said slowly:—

"I suppose—I don't know—we take off one another's masks. You have to get used to what you see before you know what you feel."

There was another silence. Then Blanche said:—"Surely you never disguised yourself?"

"I may have. You see—it would be pointless to say, 'Next time, threaten what you like, I'll do nothing to stop you.' I gave in—that's all she'll remember."

"You don't anticipate her making a habit—"

He laughed a little. "No, no. I only meant that she wanted me to dash forward and hold her with both hands—and I did."

"Do you—surely you were right to—"

"Right or wrong, there was nothing else I could do."

"It was monstrously unfair!" Blanche exclaimed.

"Why should she play the game according to the rules? You say she never had a chance to learn them—" said Daalgaard with a hint of mockery in his voice.

"I shall tell her—"

"You'll be wasting your time."

"Just the same, I—"

"It's as you wish. But I should leave it alone—you can't alter what has happened."

"What did happen—after she—when you—"

"I think we were both glad it was over—" said Daalgaard with a slight smile.

"Forgive me—but do you--does such behaviour make you feel enmity—and shrinking?"

He looked steadily at her. "Violence begets violence—of one kind or another."

"I had no right to ask you."

"Indeed you have. You're an expert in melodrama—and —"

"Please—"

"—and you must share with me some of the responsibility for this."

"I do—I will—" said Blanche, stifling a sob, "only—"

"Well?"

"If only this dreadful interlude has not destroyed what seemed to me so beautiful—so desirable—"

"It takes rather more than an interlude to destroy either beauty or desire—" said Daalgaard quietly, still looking at her.

"That was not quite what I—"

"Don't distress yourself, Mademoiselle. If you are thinking of your plans for the future, this does not affect them."

Still Blanche was not satisfied ; she struggled for words ; he waited for her to speak, and then added :—

"Naturally, you want to know how we stand, after all this. Ask her. I don't think her answer will disappoint you."

"But you—your attitude—it seems to have changed."

His glance remained on her troubled face. "No attitude, as you call it, can be static—don't you agree? Am I the same person that I was when we last talked together—are you?"

"I—I think I am—" said Blanche, and he smiled. "Are you—has she made you very unhappy?"

"She has made me feel responsible for her happiness."

"I am so glad you have come to see that at last!"

"Are you, Mademoiselle? I shall have to go to Provence, you know—there will be no getting out of it."

"I will look after her for you—perhaps the time won't seem very long."

He got up, and walked over to the mantelpiece ; then he said absently :—

"One can't separate happiness and misery—hope and despair—they get mixed up in one's mind."

"I understand that—but not what you said about the masks—"

said Blanche, after a little consideration. "Do you mean that you think most people intend to deceive—that Oriana does?"

"She admitted that she had—" he replied, as if it were a matter of no great importance, "But I understand why you wanted to shield her."

"I—I suppose it was instinctive—"

"And yet you don't think of yourself as a deceitful person?"

"No—but—"

"Do you remember what La Rochefoucauld said about that? I used to know much of him by heart when I was a student."

"It's a very long time since I—"

"You should re-read him, Mademoiselle. He knew the answer to most things—the masks he describes are still worn. '*Chacun affecte une mine et un extérieur pour paraître ce qu'il veut qu'on le croie. Ainsi on peut dire que le monde n'est composé que de mines.*' "

Blanche made no comment. She felt that he had turned their talk towards the impersonal to avoid dwelling on the scene that had just taken place, and the parting to come. She hesitated, and then said impulsively :—

"I won't ask you any more tiresome questions."

Daalgaard leaned back against the mantelpiece, his drawn face almost serene in its complete exhaustion ; recalling Oriana's look of baleful mastery, Blanche felt pity rise and choke her ; she put her hand on his arm, and said quickly :—

"I know you have had far too much to bear. It will be easier—you will forget the worst of it, and sooner than you believe."

He looked at her, trying to answer. Then he turned away, and she went out of the room. When she came back a few minutes later it was empty.

Two days after that Daalgaard set off for Provence, and Blanche perceived that he had managed to impart some of his own stoicism to Oriana, who showed a fortitude that the older woman found more alarming than she cared to own ; the "scene" with Daalgaard was not referred to : and during the first days of his absence Oriana spoke little of him.

He had been gone a fortnight when Blanche became aware that Zoë de Freysac had been at work on Aymon's parents ; she hinted that his reasons for sending his steward south were not entirely connected with the estate there, and a family conference was the

result, which was described to Blanche by Aymon. She found it difficult to make the replies he expected ; his attitude was one of sophisticated tolerance.

"Of course—" he said languidly, "I speak to you as to a woman of the world, when I admit myself partly to blame. You know my situation—" with a preening air—"It's a most unfortunate one."

Blanche murmured something non-committal, and he went on :— "My parents seem to think that Mme de Marécourt's—ah—origin—and temperament—I say nothing of her education, for till she met you, she had none—might be the cause of her drifting into a scandal. Of course that's ridiculous. Daalgaard's a very good fellow—handsome even, in that rather lugubrious northern style—but—well, my wife is hardly likely to be in danger from anyone so admirably conscious of his own position."

He took a turn or two about the library, glancing at Blanche over his shoulder.

"I think Captain Daalgaard does know his—his place—" she said in a low voice.

"Of course he does—I'm delighted you agree with me," replied Aymon. "I value your opinion—with one exception—above all others." She did not acknowledge this tribute, and he went on :—

"She'll try—doubtless she has tried—to flirt with him a little, but that—you see, I am, as ever, brutally frank—that is only one more example of an upbringing that has been pitiable—quite pitiable."

There was a pause. "I should have thought—" said Blanche, emptying her voice of all expression, "that she might have adapted herself to her surroundings."

"Ah ! yes—well, that has been a disappointment, especially to my mother. But I personally, never expected any marked improvement, you know."

"It seems to me that she has—altered."

"Do you think so ? Possibly—during the last few weeks—" said Aymon, fingering his whiskers. "People of my mother's generation expect too much—I told her so in fact. And she is obsessed, too, with the notion that the Caumonts—and others—occupy themselves in gossiping about us." He sighed. "Well—as it suited me to send Daalgaard to Provence for a little time, I was able to reassure her."

"What exactly was she afraid of ?"

"O, something very extreme. The sort of thing, if I may so put it, that might happen in one of your novels. I really didn't enquire. It's all so tedious."

Blanche was conscious of a violent irritation ; she said nothing.

"As for myself—" said Aymon, pausing to glance into a mirror —"I believe in a tacit assumption of—ah—of freedom, in marriage."

"What Mme de Roncesvaulx would call license?"

He looked rather startled. "Well—yes." He coughed, and added in a modest tone :—

"I do feel, if I may so far confide in you, that my wife *has* adapted herself, in one sense. She makes no demands—positively none, if you'll believe me."

"That must be very—helpful."

"Ah ! I see you're a little shocked by my attitude. Come now, admit it—you find my ideas too liberal."

"I—they are not exactly what I have been used to."

Aymon smiled radiantly. "I must not bore you with my theories—but it seems to me that Oriana has at least the opportunity to *learn*—from me. In time, as she begins to understand—" he glanced up at the ceiling, as if overcome by the possibilities of this vision—"who knows ? She already has beauty and wealth—she may also acquire sophistication."

"Living here alone with you?"

"O, I don't intend to play the ogre. As soon as the summer is over I shall take her to Paris for a month or so." His face clouded. "Her first entry into the world was *not* a success. However, it's all a question of—ah—poise, and knowledge."

"Do you consider her to have acquired either?"

"I suspect that question—are'n't you being satirical? What is your opinion ? Frankly, now."

"I have no experience of the kind of knowledge you refer to."

Aymon looked a little nonplussed. "Upon my word, I sometimes forget—you seem to understand so much of human affairs."

"Not everything."

"I hear that disapproving note again—have I said too much?"

"Perhaps you have—a little—" said Blanche, rising, "but I will think over what you have told me—" and she went to the door which Aymon opened for her with a bow and a smile.

A few minutes later she was in her room. The post had come—

and there was the letter from Rome. ' Blanche took it up, and covered her eyes with her hand. Then she forced herself to sit down. She slit the envelope and began to read.

CHAPTER 8 *The Waxen Man*

THE Marchesa's handwriting was dashingly illegible (except for the capital I's which stood out like so many finger-posts) and covered six sheets of violet paper. The last paragraph ran :—

"O ! dear ! I seem to have said half what I meant and nothing of what I really feel. It's all such a muddle, isn't it? But you see how I'm placed, don't you, dearest ? I think—O ! I hope and believe—that I shall be all and more that you wish in the way of a fairy godmother—it's all so romantic and touching. But Ernesto is so very—well, I've explained that part of my situation, which is, I'm sure you'll understand, much more complicated than it seems. The property is mine—at least, in one sense (O ! Blanchie, never marry a foreigner, they can be too, too impossible) and on that I am determined to have the last word—but the last word may take a good deal of saying. But don't fret. You shall hear from me again very soon, and perhaps with the best of good news for you and your charming pair—for I'm sure they are charming. If you don't hear for a few weeks it will not be because I've forgotten—how could I forget anything so thrilling ?

Ever, dear one, your most devoted

Honoria M.

P.S. You can't think how flattered I was that of all the people ready to help, you should pick on poor little Me !!!"

Compressing her lips into a thin line, Blanche re-read the letter, folded it neatly and sat thinking for a long time. Then she went to Oriana's boudoir.

Oriana was absorbed in her own correspondence. Daalgaard's letters came directed to Blanche, who addressed the envelopes for

Oriana's replies. The girl looked up as she came in and seeing the letter in her hand, gave an exclamation. Blanche said :—

"This is from the Marchesa. I fear we are going to be disappointed."

Oriana got up, her eyes widened and fixed. She said in a low voice :—"Has she refused?"

"Not quite. I think I had better read you the letter."

When Blanche had finished, Oriana sat down again, staring at the ground. She put her hand up to her head as if the effort of comprehension had been too much for her. Blanche said gently :—

"I should have warned you that she is an—rather a volatile character. I don't think we should give up hope—but there may be a considerable delay."

"You mean—she may not write again?"

"O ! I think she will. But—well, truly I don't know what to make of her answer."

Oriana pressed her hands over her eyes. Then she raised her head and said shakily :—

"I'm glad we were alone when it came." Her glance fell on her own letter. "I shall have to finish this to-morrow—" she said absently, and there was a pause.

Blanche went over to the window. "It may have been foolish—" she said at last, "but—I *had* counted on this."

Oriana sat rigidly still ; she muttered something, and then burst into a shrill laugh. Blanche turned and hurried towards her.

"Oriana—"

"It's better—to laugh—than to cry—you can see I'm not crying."

"Would you like me to write again, and insist on a definite answer?"

Oriana shook her head ; after a gasping pause she said in an almost inaudible voice :—

"I don't—I couldn't—you see, I didn't understand it all."

"Shall I read it to you again? You can stop me if it doesn't seem clear."

Oriana nodded, and Blanche read the letter once more, translating as she went along. After a short silence Oriana said :—

"Is she as silly as she sounds?"

"Not—not quite. She's inclined to let her pen run away with her. She doesn't always think what she's writing."

Oriana's eyes were on Blanche's face ; she said slowly :—“I don't either—do you think my letters sound at all like hers ?”

“I'm sure they don't.”

“I wonder—you'd better read what I've written.”

“O ! I think—”

“I want you to—please.”

Blanche obeyed. At the end of the first page she said quietly :—“You need not have concerned yourself—there's not the least resemblance.”

Oriana took her letter and looked at it doubtfully. There was a long silence before she spoke again.

“Shall we send the other one on to him ?”

“I think we must.”

“It will make him—he'll be so disappointed.”

“Anything is better than suspense.”

“I know—but—he hasn't got anyone to talk to—and—”

“I will write too, and tell him what I believe.”

“But you don't know—do you ?”

“I only meant—I could make it sound a little less depressing.”

“Without deceiving him ?”

“My dear child, why—”

“You see, we did before—and—”

“I promise you not to say anything I don't believe.”

“Very well—you send it—” said Oriana with a long sigh. She leaned her head on her hand and began to cry quietly.

“Dearest Oriana—even if this does not come to anything—I will try to think of someone else. You must not despair.”

There was a pause ; then Oriana said in a small voice :—“It's not only the letter—it's—”

“Tell me.”

“The time seems so long—sometimes I think he's been away for always.” Oriana stopped and blew her nose ; then she said in the defiant, uneasy tone that Blanche particularly dreaded :—

“It's worse for him than for me—I often don't think about missing him. If we were in Paris—” she threw herself back in her chair and looked up from beneath her lashes. “Anyhow, now I know he can be jealous without my moving a step out of this house —that's something.”

Blanche found no answer. Oriana contemplated her disapproving expression for a moment and then said thoughtfully :—

“You know—he cried—when he heard about Aymon. I didn’t know men ever cried—except in books.”

“I should not be surprised to hear that you enjoyed making him unhappy,” said Blanche severely.

“Wouldn’t you? I don’t know—I cried too. You know what happened afterwards.”

“Yes. I was horrified.”

“It’s very odd—” continued Oriana as if she had not heard, “I was dreadfully miserable—and then—I knew—” she paused, frowning a little—“I knew I could never feel quite like that again.” She got up and walked over to the bookshelf. “Who was Manon Lescaut? Was she a real person?”

Blanche shook her head.

“Just a girl in a story? Charles said I was like her—am I?”

“I hope not.”

Oriana turned, the book in her hand, her eyes gleaming. “I’ve only read half—but everyone falls in love with her.”

“It ends in tragedy.”

“Tragedy—” repeated Oriana softly, looking down at her dress. She seemed to accept the word as a tribute; it sounded strange on lips that were now yielding to a smile. Blanche gazed absently at the porcelain tiles behind the speaker’s head where entrellised purple and orange orchids supported the incongruously solid brilliance of orioles and butterflies in high relief. She said brusquely :—

“I’m glad to see you more cheerful.”

“I don’t think you are really.”

“Sometimes I feel sorry for anyone who is so unfortunate as to fall in love with you.”

“Why?”

“Because you think only of yourself—your own power.”

Oriana took the rebuke calmly. She looked at Blanche and then said :—

“I used not to be sure—I am now.”

“Sure of what?”

“That he’ll always love me.” She gave a furtive glance round the room, and putting the book back in the shelf said lightly :—

"You see—Manon Lescaut only had her beauty—that's why things didn't go well for her."

"Are you talking about your money again?"

Oriana laughed. "Of course not—we had that out long ago—don't you remember? I *know*—" she broke off. "But you wouldn't understand—you'd think it all nonsense."

"I confess I don't know what you're talking about at this moment," said Blanche, unable to resist the confidential tone; she began to smile in spite of herself.

"Shall I tell you?"

"I see you intend to."

"Now you're laughing at me—I don't care. I will show you." Oriana swept across the room and put her arm in Blanche's; then she said more gravely:—

"You mustn't think I can do without you—I know I never could. But this is something I have to do for myself."

"What is it?"

"Do you remember there was an old servant of my mother's who died just before you came to Yssimbault?"

"Yes."

"Well, she knew a great many things that French people don't know—she was very clever though she couldn't read or write, or do anything much, except cook and clean. She told me—" Oriana withdrew her arm and glided away, as if to avoid her friend's serious gaze, "that if I ever had a lover, I could make him—you know—shall I tell you how?"

"You don't mean—"

"O! you'd call it superstition and rubbish. Of course, if you don't believe, nothing works. But look—" Oriana took a key from her pocket and unlocked a drawer in her desk—"I cut off some of his hair—you can't see it, it's all baked in the clay, and—well—I can't tell you *all* that's there—but I say the words she taught me—and—" she stopped, her eyes dilated, her breath coming fast; she had forgotten her audience.

"The words she taught you?" Blanche blankly echoed.

"Some rhymes in her—Carmela's—dialect. I'm really Sicilian too—so it works for me." Oriana shut the drawer and replaced the key. "Now I suppose you're going to scold me—" she added in an uninterested voice.

"It would be quite useless."

"But you think it's horrid?"

"What do you expect me to think?"

Oriana was not listening ; she said in a low tone :—"I never knew but now I'm quite sure. I began this when he started going to see her again."

"Mme de Freysac? And did it stop him?"

"Well—not at once. But one day—the day we quarrelled—I knew he wasn't going there any more."

"I should not count on it—" said Blanche shortly. "When it comes to spells, you may find that lady has the better of you. And besides—she told him—"

"O ! I know that—" said Oriana quickly, "I'm glad she did. Now there's nothing more she can do."

"I wonder—" said Blanche, going to the door.

"Blanche—I don't want you to tell Charles about what I've just told you. Don't look like that—" as Blanche turned in the doorway—"I'll tell him one day. But he'll only laugh. He wouldn't believe in it either."

"I shall not tell him—" Blanche replied, after a pause in which they looked at one another. Then she left the room.

A fortnight later news came that the old Princesse de Roncesvaulx was dying, and Aymon's father and mother prepared to go south. For several days it was not certain whether Aymon would consent to go with them ; finally they prevailed on him to follow in a day or two, accompanied by his wife.

Aymon then announced that he could not leave until Daalgaard had been sent for ; he did not intend to entrust the head forester with his steward's new scheme for thinning the plantations without supervision : and a legal squabble over a right of way also necessitated Daalgaard's co-operation.

As soon as it became clear that her husband was to leave and her lover to return, Oriana took to her bed and declared herself unable to travel. Whether Aymon saw through the excuse or not, he made no attempt to sway the doctor one way or the other ; and to Blanche's surprise the verdict was in Oriana's favour.

For a long time Blanche had suspected that Dr Dupuy was aware of the state of affairs at the Villa ; he had attended Charles Daalgaard through three bouts of sickness, and they were friends ;

but Blanche thought it unlikely that Daalgaard would have confided in him, although he was the only man in the neighbourhood whom he could meet on an equal footing. Now it was perfectly clear that the doctor was not deceived by Oriana's glib account of her symptoms ; with the same imperviousness that had been called forth on a previous occasion he prescribed rest and light diet and gentle exercise—but no swimming, unless the weather regained the brilliance of the early summer. Aymon appeared rather pleased than otherwise at this decision ; he arranged for Daalgaard's return and set off for Provence, leaving Blanche with a sheaf of instructions for him, and these parting words :—

"Of course I shan't inform my parents of this little arrangement of mine—they would force me to send for Oriana, and between the three of them, I should not have a moment's peace. I leave her in your charge, Mademoiselle. I think I can trust you not to let either of us appear ridiculous."

Daalgaard had been absent for five weeks when Blanche and Oriana were left alone to await his return ; a note announcing the approximate time of his arrival was all that reached them after Aymon's departure. Oriana proposed to ride as far as the next village to meet her lover, and was dissuaded with difficulty ; a few hours before he was due to return Jean Desmarests came to dine and spend the afternoon with his daughter.

Oriana submitted in violent irritation ; she was sulky and disagreeable during most of her father's visit, and finally left him with Blanche on the terrace while she trailed upstairs to rest.

Jean Desmarests had remained unmoved by his daughter's ill-humour. He sipped his coffee and stirred it with a slight smile ; then he glanced at Blanche and said briskly :—

"Now, Mademoiselle, how much do you know ? Let us talk of this M. Charles Daalgaard."

The opening was too characteristic for Blanche to be completely taken aback ; she looked steadily at her former employer, and folding her hands over her needlework, said without hesitation :—

"Who has told you what you know ?"

"The old people—Mme de Roncesvaulx believes that my daughter is falling in love with him. Do you think she is ?"

"I think she may be—" said Blanche, selecting a skein of silk and threading her needle, "Would that surprise you ?"

"Not at all—" replied Desmarests, leaning back and putting the tips of his fingers together. "In the circumstances it would be a very natural proceeding."

There was a short silence; then he added in a business-like tone:—"I have considered the possibilities—only one of them interests me."

"What is that, Monsieur?"

"Whether I am to be made a grandfather. I don't care if the child's half Danish—the important thing is its existence, not its origin."

Blanche felt herself change colour; she said nothing.

"Six months ago—" pursued Desmarests, "I should not have been able to discuss anything with you in these terms. Since that time you seem to have become the confidante of almost everyone connected with my daughter. So I have not the least fear of shocking you by plain speaking."

"So I perceive—" put in Blanche in a low voice, and he went on:—

"This marriage has been a disappointment—I am prepared to admit that. Well, I know whose fault it is. Not yours, but—" he broke off, his face expressionless. "Frankly, I think you could have done better."

Again Blanche made no answer, and after a little while M. Desmarests took his leave. She had time then to compare his attitude with his son-in-law's and found it hard to decide which was the more abhorrent to her; there could be no question as to the right course, and she had taken it in deceiving both of them, however distastefully.

A few hours later Oriana and Charles Daalgaard were reunited; Blanche left them together with a sense of relief. For a week at least she would not have to devote herself to saving Aymon's face—for during the last month what threatened to be scheming and intrigue had turned into this single consideration. Then clouds began to dim the horizon.

One evening shortly after his return to the Villa, Daalgaard found Blanche alone in her room, and told her that nothing he could say seemed to reconcile Oriana to his occasional visits to Mme de Freysac. His explanation was given hesitatingly, and just for a moment she wondered if it were the true one. He said that his

cousin did him the honour to be jealous : and her jealousy might result in his dismissal from Marécourt.

"Do you mean that she intends to make mischief between you and your employer ?" Blanche exclaimed after a horrified pause.

"I suppose you might put it like that. I don't think you—I know you dislike her, and—"

"Does that surprise you ?"

"Not in the least."

"I know her influence—" said Blanche, trying to speak calmly, "But I fail to see how—what can she say ? She knows that he intends to shut his eyes to Oriana's—to the position—"

Daalgaard looked rather embarrassed. "She might make me appear a rival. The result of that would be a week's notice."

"I see. And you have to pacify her by pretending—"

"Isn't that rather hard, Mademoiselle ? I've never—she and I are old friends, and for the present we must remain so."

"I don't see how it would benefit Mme de Freysac if you were sent away from here."

"O ! she would find work for me in Paris—or elsewhere," said Daalgaard in a weary tone.

"And you would accept it ?"

"I don't propose to starve. Till I found something else, I should have to."

"And you have explained all this to Oriana ?"

"I've tried to. She's—it's harder for her—"

"I confess I dislike this double dealing as much as she does—" said Blanche primly.

Daalgaard stood perfectly still, looking at her ; then he said in an ominously quiet voice :—

"If you call it double dealing to pay an occasional visit to an old friend—"

"You must forgive me—but I look on Mme de Freysac as a very dangerous woman."

He thrust his hands in his pockets and walked away ; from the other end of the room he turned to face her ; she was aware that he was controlling his voice as he said evenly :—

"I know you do."

"Then perhaps—"

"All unattached women—" he interrupted in the same coldly

deliberate tone, "are, of course, quite incalculable—and therefore dangerous, most of all to hopelessly enfeebled creatures like myself. It's unfortunate that I can't be trusted out of your sight—but there it is. At least you both know my intentions. Good night, Mademoiselle—" and he went quickly out of the room.

CHAPTER 9 *Amenities of Family Life*

"**N**Ow that we are here together," said the Duc de Roncesvaulx, with a glance round the white and gold saloon, "it would be interesting to hear your plans for the estate—did your steward effect many changes at Castel-les-Vignes?"

"He did not have a great deal of time—" said Aymon negligently, crossing his legs and leaning back in his chair. "I think you found him intelligent as well as knowledgeable, did you not?" to his brother.

Baudoin nodded. "If he manages to make the place fit to live in, it will be an achievement—" he said, with a reflection of Aymon's languor. His wife looked anxiously at her mother-in-law, whose expression had become very severe.

The Duchesse de Roncesvaulx, Oriana and Stéphanie were in crape-hung and voluminous mourning ; Oriana's dress was relieved with a fichu of oyster muslin : the gentlemen were also in black ; Blanche's grey gown became a steely reflection in the circle of variegated darkness, where the sooty gleam of velvet strove with the troubled brilliance of moiré and bombazine. The baroque paintings on the walls and ceilings rocketed over this sable richness in streams of flaring colour : the pouring August sunshine brought out every point and quiver of light from porcelain and glass and ormolu ; but the seated figures remained untouched, except for the women's hands, moving steadily over their needlework. Stéphanie was embroidering a waistcoat for her husband ; Blanche had taken up her netting : the Duchesse de Roncesvaulx was occupied with pillow-lace for the layette of Stéphanie's child, due in the spring. Oriana alone was idle ; she sat with her hands on her lap, her eyes

lowered. They were all waiting for Mme de Roncesvaulx to speak ; she did so with characteristic trenchancy.

"Fit to live in ?" she repeated. "Your father and I managed to support existence there when we first married."

Aymon raised his eyebrows ; Baudois said in a defensive tone :—

"No one has inhabited it since then—apart from the repairs, the whole property must be reconstituted, unless we are to live there as caretakers of a ruin. It will be a matter of two or three months before I could think of taking Stéphanie to such a place."

Stéphanie blushed ; Oriana raised her eyes and gave her a long, thoughtfully contemptuous glance. The signs of Stéphanie's pregnancy were not yet apparent ; but her expression had the smug, crepuscular remoteness of the breeding animal ; whatever exuberance had once been hers was subordinated to the fulfilment of an inevitable duty.

"We lived very simply in my day—" said the Duc de Roncesvaulx, his tone implying a jocose disparagement of his sons' standards. "We were more farmers than landowners till your grandfather died, and we came here."

"I daresay—" said Aymon coolly, "but because one generation endures discomfort and—ah—squalor—need that become a tradition? Simplicity is one thing—" he glanced round the room—"piggery another."

"Come, that's going rather far—" expostulated his father, "What does your Swede propose? Rebuilding? Or—"

"He's a Dane—" interrupted Aymon coldly.

"Whatever he is, does he realise that your brother's expenditure must be limited?"

"I expect he does—you'd better ask him."

"I prefer to leave it to you young people—my ideas are out of date—" said the old man rather sadly.

"The question is—" went on Aymon, ignoring his father, "where you are to live until you can go south. With us? Or at the Château? Or would you prefer Paris?"

Oriana's eyes flashed ; her husband met her indignant stare with a smile.

Baudois appeared not to notice his sister-in-law's expression ; but there was marked circumspection in his tone as he replied :—

"It's very good of you to offer us a choice. I think not Paris—

not until Stéphanie has been confined, at least. And though we hope to see a good deal of you, I feel we should be more suitably placed at the Château—Mamma expects us, do you not, Madame?"

"Certainly—" replied Mme de Roncesvaulx, with an approving glance at Stéphanie, "But has your wife no preference? What do you say, my child?"

Stéphanie murmured something unintelligible, colouring up once more. Her husband said quickly:—

"She will be happiest where she can be of use to you—and I think that will be at the Château."

Oriana looked towards Blanche and their eyes met; then she shrugged her shoulders and resumed her former quiescent pose.

"That being settled, you and I had better have a talk with Daalgaard," said Aymon to his brother. "I can lend him to you—or would you prefer him to go back there until you come?"

"Don't you need him here?"

"Well, yes. I may be going to Paris next month—and if I'm not here, he should be."

"When are you going to Paris?" Oriana enquired in a casual tone.

"In plenty of time for you to choose your winter toilettes," said Aymon blandly. "I am in your hands—and of course, the excellent M. Worth's."

Oriana's face darkened; she said nothing. Aymon got up and strolled over to the window. Baudoine took this opportunity to gaze at Oriana, who seemed unaware of his scrutiny.

"I thought we might go out with the guns to-morrow morning," said Aymon after a pause. "I can't promise you much sport—but at least it will be an excuse to get out of these ridiculous clothes."

Baudoine laughed; his wife looked appalled, and Mme de Roncesvaulx struck in sonorously:—"So soon?"

"My dear Mother—" said Aymon, turning to gaze round the circle, "I can imagine no poorer tribute to my great-aunt than to stay indoors and unoccupied at—ah—" he broke off, and finished rather vaguely, "—at such a time."

"You must do what you think best, naturally."

"We are asking no one else—not even Philippe de Caumont. It will be a family party, and we shall return for dinner—" pursued Aymon carelessly. "Will that satisfy you?"

Mme de Roncesvaulx made no reply. Oriana got up and rang the bell. "It's stifling in here—" she said, looking at Blanche, "I'm going into the garden."

Oriana's trick of sending for hat, parasol and gloves and putting them on downstairs never failed to annoy her mother-in-law, who looked on such a procedure as vulgar, if not indecent ; now she summoned Stéphanie and sent for the carriage : Baudoin would follow them later. Aymon and his father walked out on to the terrace, and when Oriana's outdoor things arrived she and Blanche were left alone with her brother-in-law.

Oriana went over to the mirror and Baudoin followed her ; watching her in the glass, he began, as if they were alone :—

"Do you know how attractive that gesture is ? You must, as you perform it so exquisitely."

Oriana turned, her arms in their transparent sleeves still curved over her head ; she stared, frowned, and finally returned to the glass with a pouting smile. Baudoin went on :—

"Have you any idea—but of course you have—of the piquancy of mourning?"

Still Oriana did not answer ; but her expression was by no means discouraging as she lowered her eyes and drew on a pair of black silk mittens ; then she moved towards the french windows, and Baudoin offered her his arm.

"Am I to be allowed the privilege—" his voice died away as they went out on to the steps together. Presently Blanche heard Aymon call out :—"Don't ask her about the garden—she couldn't tell you the name of a single flower !", his father's abrupt laugh and Baudoin's teasing reply. A little disturbed, she sat down by the window ; as soon as Aymon and his father were gone she left the saloon and remained on the terrace till dinner-time. Stéphanie did not appear for that meal : but her husband did, then and every day on some pretext or other.

At this time Charles Daalgaard formed the habit of coming to Blanche's sitting-room in the late afternoon ; it was possible for Oriana to meet him there for half an hour or so, escaping through Blanche's dressing-room into the passage if anyone knocked at the door. It had been agreed that Blanche's presence must form a part of this arrangement, so that if any of the family came in it would be to find the steward and the companion together, a very

natural state of affairs. Blanche generally withdrew into her bedroom as soon as Daalgaard arrived. A few days after the family reunion she had been there for about twenty minutes, absorbed in re-reading her Yssimbault journal, when she heard Oriana's voice raised in anger and the door was flung open. Oriana appeared on the threshold, exclaiming :—

“Perhaps you'll believe her, if you won't listen to me ! Now, Blanche—”

“What is this ?” said Blanche resignedly, coming into the room. Charles Daalgaard was standing by the mantelpiece, his head bent ; he looked up as she came in, not at her, but at Oriana, who repeated vehemently :—

“What is it ? Just that I'm accused of letting Baudoin make love to me ! I never heard of such—tell him, Blanche—you know that it's—”

“Wait a moment—” he interposed, “This has nothing to do with Mademoiselle.”

“Indeed it has ! I want her to tell you—”

“It would make no difference what she told me—” said Daalgaard coldly, his eyes still on her face. “You are putting her into an impossible position.”

Oriana replied by stamping her foot and bursting into tears. Daalgaard looked down for a moment and then said more gently :—

“Don't cry—we won't talk about it any more.”

“You're horribly unfair !” Oriana sobbingly exclaimed. “You say dreadful things—just to make me miserable.”

“I only commented on what I saw—” said Daalgaard, an under-current of bitterness in his tone. “Perhaps you weren't aware—”

“Do you mean to insult me ?”

“No.”

The dryness with which this monosyllable was uttered seemed to take Oriana by surprise ; she dabbed at her eyes and said haughtily :—

“You've no right to say these things.”

“None.”

“I didn't mean—”

“I know what you meant. Of course, you must behave as you choose.”

There was a pause. “I've done nothing—” said Oriana sulkily.

"Certainly, there's no law against flirting with a brother-in-law—*it's a family affair.*"

"But I didn't ! *Blanche*—"

"I think Captain Daalgaard is right—you should not ask me to speak for you—" *Blanche* gently interposed.

"But he's angry—aren't you ?" said *Oriana*, her voice changing as she moved towards *Daalgaard*.

"I was. I daresay I shall get over it."

Oriana looked rather puzzled.

"—or used to it—" he added, as if to himself.

"Get used to what ? You're so unreasonable !"

"Yes—I suppose I am."

With a swirl of her black draperies *Oriana* crossed the room and took his hand. "Tell me what I did—and I won't do it again—" she suggested.

He gazed at her for a moment without speaking. Then he said in a low voice :—

"You can't help the way you look and move. You're quite right—it's no business of mine."

"But you mustn't say that ! I belong to you—don't I ?" pleaded *Oriana*, clinging to his hand.

In the silence that followed *Blanche* knew that her presence had been forgotten. As *Daalgaard* answered he turned his eyes away.

"I don't know—why should you belong to anyone ?"

"Because I—"

"You see, you don't understand the—what you make other people feel."

"I know what *I* feel."

"Yes, darling—but that isn't all."

"You mean I—am I selfish ?" said *Oriana* in a wondering tone.

Daalgaard's expression changed from harsh and bitter melancholy to an amusement that was wholly tender and loving. He said nothing ; then he shook his head, as if at his own thoughts, and walked over to the window.

"What do you—would you like me to be rude to *Baudoin* ?" said *Oriana* persuasively.

"No, no. Poor fellow, what has he done ?"

"Now you're making fun—" said *Oriana* in a reproachful tone.

"Surely there's a middle path between rudeness and flirtation ?"

"That's a horribly vulgar word."

He turned and looked at her ; she flushed and said quickly :—

"I mean—you're quite wrong—about Baudoin and me." She paused and then added in a defiant manner :—"I've never said it about you—and—and—"

"Well?"

"O !—anyone—" she murmured, turning her eyes away.

"Have we got back to my cousin again ?" said Daalgaard after a short silence.

"Well, and if we have ? You've no right to—"

"Oriana—"

"No, Blanche, I must say it. Why shouldn't I flirt with someone else, when he—" she broke off, struggling for words. Daalgaard remained impassive and severe.

"I see—" he said at last, "I didn't realise—my visits to Zoë—one visit, to be exact, since my return from Provence—is to be your defence for everything."

"Quite a lot can happen in one visit, you know—" said Oriana spitefully.

"Yes, indeed—if one's driven enough."

"Driven? You—"

"Isn't this discussion rather pointless ?"

"I hate you ! Go away—leave me alone !"

"Certainly—" Daalgaard replied in the even, deliberate tone that Blanche had come to dread more than contumely or harshness : and without another glance in Oriana's or her direction, he walked from the room.

. Some hours later Aymon, his wife and the Roncesvaulx party were sitting on the terrace. It was now understood that the whole family spent the evenings together, either at the Villa or the Château. Baudoin had brought some new music ; he suggested that Stéphanie should play while he and Oriana sang some of the duets they had been practising ; the others turned to listen and the three young people went to the piano. Aymon excused himself ; he had an appointment with Daalgaard.

Presently the two voices rose together and Blanche, sitting a little apart, put down her needlework and looked at the Duc de Roncesvaulx, who was beating time with one hand ; his wife leaned back, half closing her eyes ; between their two chairs she

could observe singers and accompanist in a square of yellow light. A fiery August moon was rising beyond the encircling trees ; the air was heavy and warm.

The duet was followed by another ; then Baudoin sang alone. His clear easy tenor throbbed into the darkness, outsoaring piano and guitar.

*“Si vous croyez que je vais dire
Qui j’ose aimer,
Je ne saurais pour un empire
Vous la nommer. . . .”*

As Oriana lifted her head and looked at her brother-in-law Blanche saw her smile. The song changed to the minor key.

*“Du mal qu’une amour ignorée
Nous fait souffrir,
J’en porte l’âme déchirée
Jusqu’à mourir.
Mais j’aime trop pour que je die. . . .”*

She’s enjoying it, thought Blanche with unwilling amusement, as her eyes wandered from Stéphanie’s long stooping back and stiff ringlets to Oriana’s brilliant eyes. Stéphanie was so null that it was impossible to feel more than a faint depreciation of the circumstances that had bound her, at seventeen, to a worthless ninny with a roving eye and a pleasant voice : while Oriana’s nature was incalculable enough to inspire alarm rather than pity.

As the last chord died away there came a gentle deliberate clapping from the other end of the terrace ; Blanche looked up and saw Aymon : behind him stood the darker figure of Charles Daalgaard.

Baudoin left the piano and standing between the french windows, smilingly acknowledged his brother’s applause ; Oriana fingered the striped ribbons of her guitar. Stéphanie looked at her husband admiringly.

“You have lured us from our duties—” announced Aymon, advancing. Daalgaard remained where he was, his face a narrow oval in the dusk.

“Now we have come, you must continue—” went on Aymon,

raising his voice a little. "Do you hear, Mesdames? What is it to be?"

Oriana's expression changed to one of alarm; she got up and came out on to the terrace.

"That's too bad—" protested her husband. "You looked charming just as you were."

"Shall we try the new duet again?" Baudoin suggested.

Oriana shook her head.

"Then sing alone—I insist—" said Aymon, with his air of gallant mastery. "Anything—one of the old songs."

Oriana shrugged her shoulders and held out her hands into which Baudoin placed the guitar; then, leaning against the folded shutter, one foot in its black satin slipper on the step of the french window, she sang one of the Sicilian melodies she had learnt from Carmela.

Baudoin exclaimed :—"Exquisite! What was it? A love-song?"

"Give us a translation—" commanded Aymon, who had disposed himself elegantly against a pillar.

"It's about jealousy—and hatred—" said Oriana after a pause.

"Exquisite indeed!" repeated Baudoin. "I delight in the barbaric, above all things. Won't you give us another?"

"What was that old English song that Mademoiselle found for you?" said Aymon, "Something about cards—and kisses. Do you recollect it?"

"I can't pronounce the words—" said Oriana, turning away.

"Only Mademoiselle will be able to criticise—do oblige us, won't you?"

"I've forgotten it.

"Will not Stéphanie sing now?" interposed Mme de Roncesvaulx in a reprimanding tone; there was an instant's silence, and then both brothers repeated the request. But Stéphanie did not sing and her husband, accompanying himself, gave them a German ballad. All this time Daalgaard had remained standing, until Aymon indicated a chair in which he seated himself outside the circle where he could hear but not see the singers.

During the course of another duet Aymon leant over Blanche and said in a low voice :—

"Will you walk round the gardens with me? There is something about which I must consult you."

Blanche's dislike and disapproval of Aymon de Marécourt had reached its height some time ago ; now she recalled with astonishment her refusal to enter into a pact against him ; no intrigue, no disloyalty was worthy of the name where he was concerned.

On this occasion his request for advice was, as she had surmised, an excuse for the announcement of his intentions. After a certain amount of circumlocution he told her that he had again considered his father-in-law's suggestion of a trip to Mexico. He had been approached a second time by Montholon, and now he and Oriana were to set out in the early autumn for Chapultepec, via Mexico City ; they would remain there for about a year.

Without giving her time to comment or question, Aymon then produced his reasons for this change of plan. Stéphanie's pregnancy had placed him in an awkward position ; his child, not Baudoin's, must inherit the Desmarests millions : and he had been informed and indeed believed that the sea-voyage and the change of climate would bring about what he described as "a more convenient state of affairs."

By this time Blanche had recovered enough to ask if Dr Dupuy had been consulted. Aymon shook his head and replied evasively that he had better authority behind him than that of a mere country practitioner. He paused ; it was impossible for Blanche to see his face, as they were walking under the trees. Suddenly an acute and terrifying suspicion shot through her.

"May I ask you something ? You know that Oriana's happiness is my only concern."

"Please say whatever is in your mind, Mademoiselle."

"Have you consulted Mme de Freysac over this ? Is it by her advice that you are making this expedition ?"

Aymon's hasty denial and his nervous laugh as he accused Mlle Peverence of a too active imagination were unconvincing. As he continued to speak of the arrangements he was making for his journey Blanche tried desperately to perceive the background of his proposals. Then she was given a clue. Aymon said in a casual tone :—

"It will be a sacrifice, of course. Quite confidentially, however, there will be one compensation."

"What is it ?"

"Well—absolutely between ourselves, and quite apart from the fact that I shall be thankful to escape from the prudery and censure

of the neighbourhood—I think I shall be consoled. A certain lady, whose name I need not mention, will—ah—will join us after a few weeks. I'm sure I don't know what I've done to deserve such—”

“Do you mean that Mme de Freysac has decided to follow you ?”

Aymon replied in a bridling manner and with a good deal of gentlemanly hesitation that this was in fact the case. He indicated Mme de Freysac's devotion and his own unworthiness in a long and rambling discourse of which Blanche heard only the opening phrases.

At last all was made clear. Zoë de Freysac had arranged, in one stroke, Blanche's departure and her own solitude with Daalgaard—who would, of course, have to remain at Marécourt to manage the estate during his employer's absence ; whether or not she followed Aymon and Oriana to the new world (and this seemed extremely doubtful) Mme de Freysac had ensured her cousin's isolation and possibly his dependence on her companionship during the first miserable weeks of Oriana's absence. It was a manœuvre that was bound to be successful unless immediate action were taken.

Long after Aymon had left her Blanche walked up and down the alleys, forcing herself from panic, seeking a counter-attack. In the face of this disaster Charles Daalgaard might be induced to borrow what he needed from her in order to elope with Oriana ; or, in the weeks that remained, she might implore and obtain a favourable answer from Honoria Mazarotti.

It was impossible to assess all the contingencies at once ; and blindly reaching out towards any alternative, Blanche found herself at the end of the furthest terrace, behind the hedge that screened the swimming-bath from the gardens.

She had quite forgotten the quarrel that had taken place in her sitting-room a few hours ago ; it seemed no more than the shadow of a dream, part of a story that had momentarily interested her. As she turned the corner and gazed blankly across the pool she saw Oriana and Daalgaard entering the pavilion together. To observe them unaware and reunited was to realise suddenly and to the full all that they were about to endure.

For a moment hope and resolution died within her. As she walked slowly back to the house they did not revive. She reached her own room and fell on her knees.

She did not rise until the way was clear and her entreaties answered. Daalgaard and Oriana must be united as soon as possible, if not in wedlock then in flight, with the ultimate hope of regularising their positions. Perfectly resolute and composed, Blanche sat down and made an entry in her journal.

Long afterwards she recalled those first desperate moments and her ensuing resolution in thankfulness and wonder ; and many years later still, when a more credulous and pictorial faith had superseded the austere and selfless spirituality of her father's teaching, she came to believe, in her days of mental solitude and physical decline, that his spirit had been permitted to mediate between her prayers and the hidden machinations of an inscrutable power.

CHAPTER 10 *Another Parting*

A YMON had made it quite clear that, while still treating Blanche as a confidante, he intended to dispose of her services as soon as a convenient moment arrived ; she was not to accompany Oriana to Mexico, nor to Paris, where they were to stay for the first fortnight of September. She concluded that between them his mother and his mistress had succeeded in representing her as a dangerous influence : and so she must prepare Oriana for the loss of both friend and lover.

After a sleepless night Blanche decided to tell Daalgaard the bad news first ; together they might evolve some comfort for Oriana. She nerved herself for the effort—and then heard with astonishment and relief that he was already prepared ; Aymon's complacency had come out in various hints and allusions that added up to a forewarning of his expedition.

Charles Daalgaard set himself to discuss the immediate future with frankness and stoicism : he also undertook breaking the news to Oriana. Several days passed before they could be alone together ; during that time Blanche persuaded Aymon that she was the best person to tell his wife what was going forward. When at last she

came back into her sitting-room after leaving Daalgaard and Oriana there alone for an hour, she was ready for the worst ; she had a bottle of smelling-salts in her hand ; as the door shut behind her she clutched it nervously.

Charles Daalgaard was in an upright chair by the window, Oriana on the floor beside him, leaning against his knee ; one of his hands was on her shoulder, the other gripped the nail-studded chair-arm. He glanced up as Blanche came in and gave her a faint smile. Oriana did not move or raise her eyes.

There was a silence which was broken at last by Daalgaard ; as he spoke he passed his hand through Oriana's roughened curls.

"She has been very brave and good—" he said gently. "She is going to Paris next week. That was decided last night, apparently."

Blanche's first thought had nothing to do with the immediate circumstances—was Oriana always to be treated as a child ? That she herself was at one with Daalgaard in this point of behaviour gave her a feeling of dismay ; she at least should have achieved a more reasonable attitude by this time.

Then she saw that Oriana had not wept ; as she stared across the room with a wild, tearless glance, she tried to speak : no sound came. She began to tremble ; a dull flush swept over her face. Gradually she grew quieter ; her head dropped and she started to cry.

He bent down so as to catch whatever words came between the sobs ; he murmured some endearment that must have been private and particular to them, for Blanche could not make out what it was ; he seemed absorbed in receiving and soothing Oriana's despair ; his expression was patient and deeply loving, not hopeless or embittered, as Blanche had expected to see it.

She came forward and sitting down, said what was reassuring and kind ; yet in that moment she realised for the first time that she did not love the strange, intimidating creature her pupil had become, that she never had loved her enough to think only of relieving her grief. Oriana was the centre of a structure that now verged on ruin ; in a desperate effort to keep her there, Blanche exclaimed :—

"You must control yourself, Oriana ! We have a great deal to discuss."

The result of this sudden burst of irritation was unexpected.

Oriana raised her streaming eyes and looked at Blanche in silence for a moment or two ; then she said in a surprisingly steady tone :—

“I am trying to, Blanche—I will try.”

Blanche did not see the look that Daalgaard gave her as she replied in a much gentler voice :—

“We shall have to dress in a moment—I know it’s very hard.”

In the pause that followed Daalgaard said quietly :—“It’s better you should cry if you want to—try not to think about anything for a moment—just let yourself go.”

Oriana said nothing ; then she laid her cheek against his hand. Some of his composure seemed to be flowing into her ; she wiped her eyes and said almost inaudibly :—

“I don’t want to now. Tell Blanche what you said we must do.”

The conversation that followed was very brief. In the last resort, and rather than let the departure to Mexico take place as Aymon had planned it, Daalgaard agreed to borrow enough money to take Oriana and himself to England where, as his backer, Blanche must be responsible for finding him a position ; as he was very unwilling to do this, he desired that Blanche should again write to Honoria Mazarotti, asking for an immediate and definite answer. Meanwhile Oriana was to accompany Aymon to Paris and to appear to fall in with his plans. She had given way to despair at this decision, because she believed that her husband would force her to embark without warning ; in fact the strain of the last weeks had resulted in panic and misery. She considered her lover’s plan of procrastination fatal and mistaken : to leave him for a fortnight was to her the preliminary to a permanent farewell ; and neither Daalgaard’s nor Blanche’s assurances could dissuade her from this conviction. Yet with a curious and uncharacteristic meekness she submitted herself to a decree that seemed to be separating her from all she loved best in the world.

This strange docility caused a revulsion, a self-disgust in Blanche that she could neither understand nor control. To see Oriana crushed to obedience in this manner was to see her stretched on an instrument of torture that Blanche now recognised as of her own making.

“It’s my fault ! I should have let her alone !”

She did not think she had uttered the words aloud ; they seemed to rise and choke her. Blind and sick, she tried to reach the door of

her bedroom : then, spinning and whirling in flame-streaked darkness, she felt herself sink to the floor. She opened her eyes to see Daalgaard bending over her, the smelling-salts in his hand. Blanche looked round. She was lying on the sofa. Oriana was not there.

She recalled seldom yet always with shame the half-hour that followed. As she reeled and fell there had been a knock on the door ; Oriana ran to answer it and heard her husband calling her from the other end of the passage ; she pushed past the servant, telling him not to go in, as Mlle Blanche was not well ; then she caught up with Aymon and persuaded him to go himself for the doctor : the servants were so stupid, and she was very anxious about her friend. By the time Oriana re-entered Blanche's room Daalgaard had left. Blanche said nothing to her pupil of what had passed between them.

As soon as she recovered her first instinct was to conceal the rapidly diminishing guilt and horror that had caused her breakdown. Daalgaard interrupted her excuses with an indifference that she perceived to be formal and assumed. Now he told her that they had burnt their boats ; for better or for worse, Oriana was to be wrenched from her setting of luxury and ease to take up life as a dependant and an outcast in a foreign country ; he had done with warnings and doubts and indecision. He stood up and looked out of the window ; then his glance met hers.

"Are you pleased with your latest creation ?"

Blanche put her hand up to her head ; she murmured confusedly :—"I don't know—what do you—"

There was no irony in his tone, but an odd, controlled violence as he went on :—

"Is she the best type of tragic heroine ? Are you quite satisfied ?" Blanche could only stare at him in silence and he added with a total change of manner :—

"Before she comes back—there is something you should know. I don't intend to tell it her just now."

"Yes ? Please go on."

"You may remember that more than two months ago I wrote to my brother in America. Yesterday my letter was returned. That means that he is either dead or untraceable."

"I see—" said Blanche faintly, adding :—"I suppose you never really hoped that he would be able to help you ?"

"Did you?"

"I don't think so—" replied Blanche, shrinking from his look. "I'm sorry—you must be very anxious about him—and this distress on top of all the others—"

"O! they balance one another out—" he interrupted in a light cold tone. "I thought you had better know."

"Yes—thank you—I am sorry to have been so foolish—" said Blanche sitting up, her hand on her forehead.

"Are you all right now? Is there anything that I could get for you?"

"Nothing—I think I shall—I am better left alone—" Blanche replied. She did not look at him again; a moment later she heard him shut the door. She staggered to her bedroom, undressed and fell asleep immediately.

When Aymon and Oriana left for Paris Blanche sank into a deep depression; she was haunted by Oriana's look of bewildered misery, the terrified gleam in her eyes as she reiterated her belief that this parting was to be final. Nothing had roused her from despair; Blanche wondered how, if at all, it would affect her husband who left the Villa in high spirits.

During the first days of September Blanche was entirely alone; then Daalgaard began to show signs of remorse for his harshness towards her; or perhaps, like Aymon and Oriana, he needed someone to confide in; she was never quite sure whether his desire for her company was based on liking or convenience.

They spent a good deal of time together, generally in the evenings. Oriana and Aymon had been gone a week when he came into her room after supper; she had gone upstairs early, hoping to avoid this; for just lately she had experienced an inexplicable dread of being left alone with him. She had almost forgotten her breakdown and his comments on her attitude towards Oriana; she could only efface them when he was not there.

Yet all her dread could not eliminate the pleasure of knowing that he needed her; they were like old friends, who understand but do not quite trust one another. She made him sit down and gave him coffee; he was looking worn and exhausted.

They sat in silence for a moment or two; then he said abruptly:—

"I have a confession to make."

Blanche looked alarmed; he added with a hard smile:—

"I think it will please you."

"Tell me."

"Well—you were not entirely unjust to my cousin. I thought you were—until this evening."

Blanche looked at the clock and he went on, his glance following hers :—

"I have just left her. We spent some hours together."

"Is that all your confession?" said Blanche, trying to speak lightly.

"No."

There was a long silence. Daalgaard leant back in his chair and closed his eyes. Blanche took her needlework from the table and bent over it ; she knew, none better, that confidences are not made in an atmosphere of anxiety and suspense. Her attitude, the comfortable, semi-domestic scene created by the shaded lamp and the tray of coffee and little cakes on the table between them might have their effect on her companion's strained nerves. At last he opened his eyes and gazed at the slender twinkling flames of the newly lit fire. Then he said slowly, in a constrained, cold voice :—

"I thought she seemed distressed. I asked her if anything was the matter. She laughed and said, 'Why should there be?' Then something very odd happened. I can't understand—" he broke off.

"What was it?"

"You know that bird—the macaw? I went over to his perch and ruffled his feathers, as I often do. Suddenly he twisted round and got hold of my finger—his beak's like a razor, and I was put out, it was so unexpected. I said something abusive, and began to bind up my hand as best I could. Then I looked up, and saw her staring at me."

"What did she say?"

"Nothing—that was what surprised me. It was not like her."

"Did she seem distressed?"

Daalgaard leant forward, his eyes on his bandaged hand. "No—" he said, "She was smiling."

In the silence that followed Blanche choked down the sick dread that rose within her and said evenly :—

"Did she make light of it, then?"

"Well, I tried to. I felt excessively foolish, standing there with the blood oozing down my fingers and that wretched bird screaming

and swaying as if it wanted another bite at me. I said, 'I always knew he was a familiar—is this a sign that I'm not wanted?' She didn't answer. Then she sent for bandages and hot water and bound up my hand."

"What happened then?"

"I said something else about her having a protective spirit—the servants won't go near that bird—she always feeds it herself." In the pause that followed, he cleared his throat and then added in the same harsh, inimical manner, frowning a little:—"She said, 'Yes—it is convenient—' still with that odd smile—and I began to talk about something else."

"You were surprised by her attitude?"

"Yes, I was. She got up and stood over me, and said—'As you are here, don't let us waste time—what are your plans?'"

Blanche dropped her work and stared at the speaker. He returned her look with one of defiant distaste, and went on, forcing out the words:—

"I said, 'Plans? I haven't any—' and then I said, 'Unless you mean for the estate—' and began to talk about the harvest. But she interrupted me."

"How?"

"She said,—'You're going to run away with Oriana de Maré-court—are you?'" He stopped and looked at Blanche. "What should I have said then?"

Blanche ignored the satirical inflection.

"You know her better than I do—what did you say?"

"I said, 'Am I? Haven't we your approval?' I was so taken aback, that I—" He stopped again. The silence was a very long one.

Then he got up, and standing in front of the fire, said in a different voice:—

"I was bewildered. We—I was in love with her once. But I never imagined—" he broke off again, looking into the fire.

"Had you not better tell me exactly what happened?"

He drew a long breath and put one hand over his eyes.

Blanche waited a moment; then she said in an extremely gentle voice:—

"You did tell me she was jealous."

"I know—but that was because I—well, before, I used to spend most of my free time with her. She leads a dull, solitary life here,

as women in her position must, and I quite understood that she thought I was neglectful. After all, I owed her a great deal."

"Then this was more than jealousy?"

"I don't know."

"Perhaps you would rather not—"

"She flung herself down—" he stopped, and there was another silence.

"Did she threaten—anyone?"

"Yes."

"Oriana?"

"Yes."

"How could she possibly have guessed your intentions?"

"I did ask her that. She seemed to be so sure of what we were going to do that it was absurd to go on denying it, and I could see that my—levity—had enraged her. She said she knew what your ideas were, and your influence, and how you had worked upon us. She seemed to have discussed you with Mme de Roncesvaulx. Then—she began to be abusive."

"Of you?"

"Yes. She said, if I was sentimental and besotted enough to fit into your schemes, that was no reason why I should destroy a marriage. I made the obvious answer, and she said that she had only encouraged de Marécourt in order to help me."

"I knew that—didn't you?"

"I never thought about it. I suppose I was rather surprised when she—when it began. I was idiot enough to say I didn't need that kind of help—and she—I can't go into that, though. I tried to leave. She threatened to follow me."

"Did you—were you able to soothe her?"

"I didn't feel like soothing her."

"I mean—was there anything you could say to make it easier?"

"There might have been—but I'd lost my temper by that time. I pushed her away, and went out. She did follow me—some of the way. But, of course, you wish to hear the details—don't you?"

Blanche shook her head.

"She said one thing again and again. She said, 'If you go on with this—I shall stop you. I would rather see you dead, than bound to anyone but me.'"

There was another long silence. Then Blanche said:—

"Did you know that she looked on you as her property?"

"In a way—I suppose I did. I've had—there have been other women since that time in Paris, and she always knew about them."

"You mean that you told her?"

"Not at the time—but afterwards. I suppose she knew that this—that I—" he faltered and stopped, as if in misery and self-disgust.

Blanche leaned back and let her hands drop on either side of her chair. A fierce joy ran through her as she thought of Zoë de Freysac's humiliation ; then, recalling the first part of the narrative, she said suddenly :—

"Please do something for me—will you?"

"What is it?" said Daalgaard in a suspicious tone.

"Go immediately to Dr Dupuy and let him look at your hand."

He stared at her, and laughed ; then he said in a more ordinary tone :—"You're *impayable*, as they say here. Do you mean she was trying to poison me? I never believed in that chocolate story of yours, you know."

"I daresay not—but isn't it better not to run any risks?"

"What could Dupuy do? It happened several hours ago."

"He should look at the wound in any case—please do as I suggest."

She looked up at him, and he met her eyes with a smile that ended in a grimace. "It's half an hour's walk—and it's raining."

"Believe me, I am serious. I beg you—"

"Do you really believe my cousin is capable of putting me out of the way?"

"I don't know what she is capable of—" said Blanche with frigid bitterness, "but I do know that you owe it to Oriana not to be foolish."

Daalgaard looked gloomily at his hand ; then he said :—"He'll cauterise it—that will hurt like the devil, and then he'll keep me up till all hours with his conversation."

"It will be worth it—" said Blanche stubbornly.

He did not reply for a moment or two ; then he said absently :—"I've known Zoë for seventeen years."

He turned away and walked to the other end of the room. Pacing slowly back again, his head bent, he continued :—"She may lose me my position—that can't be helped now. But I want you to write to Oriana and try to persuade her to stay on in Paris till we can leave this place together."

"Shall you advise that too?"

"No. She would begin thinking about Zoë."

"Yes—she might—" said Blanche, after a pause in which she folded her needlework and got up. "I will do that—on condition that you go straight to the doctor."

"Very well—" said Daalgaard with an acid glance, "You have been very forbearing."

"Forbearing?"

"Yes. I expected you to settle down to abusing Zoë."

"Are you still attached to her?" said Blanche before she could stop herself.

Daalgaard was at the door; he waited, looking at the ground; then he said in a low voice:—

"She made me feel guilty. She was playing a part all these years, and I was the audience."

"What part?"

"The old friend—the friend to whom one tells everything. Now—" he paused and raised his eyes, looking beyond Blanche to the shuttered windows.

"Well?"

"I was fond of her. Not as you thought—but because we always understood one another, and she was very kind to me." He looked at Blanche for a moment, and then said simply:—

"I never want to see her again. She made me feel a fool—I'd rather be a brute than a fool."

CHAPTER II *A Letter from Abroad*

BLANCHE was obsessed with thoughts of danger in the days that followed; but Daalgaard appeared unaffected by his experiences: he made no comment on her alarm, and she began to feel that it was fantastic and senseless.

She did not expect him to refer to his cousin again; but he did, speaking of her with the detachment of complete rejection. In a last desperate appeal she had told him the secret of her

power over Jean Desmarests, whom she had known thirty years ago in Paris, before her marriage.

"Thirty years ago?" Blanche exclaimed, "In her teens?"

"She was fifteen. She had run away from home and was singing and playing in a Russian café. She fell in love with Desmarests, and gave him money."

"But surely at that time they were both penniless? I always understood—"

"She had the means of earning—" said Daalgaard shortly. "They went into partnership together."

"I don't understand."

"A provincial manufacturer—respectable, married—set her up as his mistress. She bled him—then, with Desmarests' help, he was blackmailed. Between them they made a considerable sum. There was some quarrel as to Zoë's share, and she and Desmarests parted company."

"He left her?"

"Yes—taking their joint earnings with him."

"And after that—she—"

"She drifted. Then she married the General. It's not a pretty story—poor Zoë."

"Why did she tell you?" said Blanche in a low voice.

"It came out—with a great deal more that I hadn't been told."

"It's the most horrible thing I ever heard."

"I daresay. At least it justifies your disapproval."

The shrinking irritation in his voice silenced her, and they said no more on that occasion; later on, hearing him speak contemptuously of Oriana's father, Blanche was inclined to be over-sympathetic, and he interrupted her with:—

"I know what you are thinking—he and my cousin are birds of a feather. You seem to forget that she was almost a child when they first knew one another."

"It is easy to be charitable now—but if you had been told that story when you—when she—"

He broke into her hesitations with a short laugh. "If she had chosen to tell me when I was nineteen, I should have wanted to fight him. In those days, any appeal to pity—I called it chivalry, of course—was unfailing."

"And now?" said Blanche with unwilling curiosity.

"O! now—" said Daalgaard with the air of one closing the conversation, "It's nothing—neither pitiable, nor horrific, nor anything else—" And neither then nor ever again did he allude to the subject of his cousin's past.

The next day Blanche drove over to the seaport, where she was to spend the day with Alfred Marchant, with whom she had been corresponding more frequently. At first she thought it curious that he made a point of meeting her when she was detached from her circle, and from Oriana; then she concluded that this was meant to indicate his continued and increasing disapproval of her actions. But as soon as they were together she became aware that whatever breaches had existed between them were now sealed. He greeted her affectionately, and to begin with there was no censure, no reflection on her motives, as at their last meeting. Rather to her surprise she heard that he was not crossing that night; he had taken rooms at an inn, where they dined. Then a walk was proposed.

At first the talk was of Cordelia's health and of mutual friends; then Alfred told Blanche that public opinion was "coming round." She was now pitied rather than blamed and could re-establish herself as soon as she chose. Blanche replied absently; then she decided to fill in the gaps left by her letters. Alfred Marchant listened without comment; when she had finished he said genially:—

"And are you pleased with the turn matters have taken, or otherwise?"

There was something familiar about the question; Blanche recalled Daalgaard's "Are you satisfied with your new creation?" and paused before she answered.

"I must accept a certain amount of responsibility for these young people's happiness—so naturally I am anxious."

"Young people—isn't he nearly twice her age?"

"Yes—but—"

"But you see them as a couple?"

"Yes."

"Then that is settled—" said Alfred Marchant in a low voice. "They are a couple."

"Well—hardly. I have told you his situation. It's unfortunate and ill-deserved."

There was a pause. Then Alfred said:—

"Not entirely. According to you, two women are in love with him, and a third—you are going to find him a position, I think you said?"

Disliking his tone, Blanche remained silent : and he went on :—

"Upon my word, he must be quite a heart-breaker."

"Alfred—"

"Well, here's the young woman throwing herself out of a window for his *beaux yeux* and the old one trying to kill him—wasn't that what you implied?"

"No—I was wrong. I did think—"

"In any case—" pursued Alfred blithely, "he seems in great demand—the ladies set on him, literally. One cuts his cheek and the other his wrist—if there's anything of him left, he—"

"It was not at all amusing at the time—" put in Blanche in a repressive tone.

"Well, perhaps I'm jealous—I never had any success with women."

For some minutes they walked on in silence ; then he said in a more serious tone :—

"Forgive me, my dear. I believe in the situation and its difficulties—but somehow not in the protagonists."

"Because you've never seen them."

"No—best not to meet one's successful rivals."

"But Alfred—I shall be coming home quite soon now."

"With a new novel in your trunk?"

"I thought you—at least Cordelia will be glad to see me—for myself."

"My dear Blanche, don't be foolish—you have no idea how much I have missed you. I am delighted to hear that your—your work here is nearly at an end. But I must put this question—could you not have left well alone as soon as your hero and heroine had declared themselves?"

"I don't—"

"The situation was perfectly clear. Mme de Marécourt has a lover and her husband a mistress—neither has any designs on the other's freedom. Suppose you had left them and come home—you might have returned ten years hence to find the position unchanged."

"You mean that I should have left an inexperienced girl to—"

"She seems experienced enough in the ways of her own world. Would it not have been wiser to let her follow them—alone?"

"Alfred! I must say I thought we were agreed over—over—"

"Over rules of conduct? They may vary."

"Rules of conduct! What do you mean? You would have advised me to encourage sin—immorality—"

He interrupted her with a deep exasperated sigh. "You say yourself that this Danish fellow is a good influence—why else did you throw them together?"

"Because I hoped for an annulment—and then remarriage."

"And the happy ending? Do you think she is suited to be the wife of a poor man?"

"She might be."

"You're not certain?"

"I can't foretell the future."

"No—but you seem to be arranging it. Isn't that rather—don't be angry with me—rather presumptuous?"

"It may seem so to you—but I believe myself to have been—directed—in this matter—" said Blanche in a low firm tone. She added:—"And besides—Zoë de Freysac would never have allowed them to be happy together."

"She showed no inclination to interfere until she realised that an elopement was in question. Her chief concern, surely, was the ultimate possession of the Villa."

"She seems to have forgotten that—perhaps she meant to share it with him—with her cousin."

"You see, Blanche, there was another alternative. If you had let this passion, love-affair, call it what you like, take its natural course, something much more—facile—might have taken its place."

"Facile?"

"Don't look so disgusted. Your young lady might have tired of her lover. That being so—she finds someone else in Paris or in the neighbourhood, and he goes back to his cousin."

"You have no idea of what you are saying."

"O! I daresay this Mme de Freysac is a detestable woman—but she seems to have kept Daalgaard's affection, and even his respect, for a number of years."

"She has lost it now."

"I don't care for that tone of satisfaction, Blanche. Frankly

now—did you not declare war on her, just as you allied yourself with Mme de Marécourt and Daalgaard?"

"That is a *reductio ad absurdum*. In any case, it was Mme de Freysac who started by attacking me."

"Do you think she really did?"

"You did not doubt it when I first told you."

"No—" said Alfred Marchant in a considering tone, "She must be an odd creature."

"Odd!" echoed Blanche with an irritated laugh.

"But no odder, I should say, than the father of this girl, who seems to be aware of everything that is going on—why does not he intervene? And what do the neighbours say, do you suppose?"

"I think he has no notion of an elopement—" replied Blanche after a pause; she felt the second question to be uninteresting and unanswerable.

"But Mme de Freysac will take care that he has?"

"He won't see her."

"Then she will communicate with him through the de Ronces-vaulx? What *is* going to happen?"

"I don't know—" said Blanche slowly, "All I know is that I must stay here until—"

"Until the runaways are 'safely gone'?"

"Perhaps—and then afterwards for a little while."

"They'll accuse you."

"Naturally—I am not going to evade that, or any other contingency."

"Do you mean openly to acknowledge your responsibility?"

"If need be."

"It's perfect madness!"

"Dear Alfred, do not let us quarrel. All I know is that in a few weeks I shall be home. One of these days you will see it as I do."

He gazed at her between despair and admiration. Then with an artificiality that was obvious enough to make her very uncomfortable, he began to speak of other things. He refused her invitation to Marécourt: he refused to return to the subject of her activities. As they parted he said abruptly:

"I had arranged to stay on here in the hope of taking you back with me. Is it any use?"

"None, I fear—" said Blanche with a faint smile.

"Very well, then. Good-bye, Blanche—" and he was gone, leaving her to struggle with unuttered reproaches ; the course of duty was hard indeed when Alfred Marchant set himself against her. Blanche returned to the Villa in gloom and bitterness ; she had expected antagonism and argument, but not this contemptuous indifference.

She dreaded spending the evening alone ; but she had to resign herself, for Daalgaard had told her that he was engaged to supper with Dupuy. As she sat down a note was brought to her.

"I must see you to-night. Please wait up for me. It is of the utmost importance. C.D."

"Nothing can be worse than this—I have reached the bottom—" said Blanche half aloud. If the news had been good Daalgaard would have come to her without warning. Whatever he had to say must surely involve the ruin of all her plans. She ate a mouthful or two, drank a glass of wine and rang for coffee.

Alfred Marchant's farewell had been doubly unfortunate in that it had weakened the resolution of which she was now more than ever in need. Furthermore, she found herself spiritually dumb ; no cry for help rose from lips accustomed to prayer in all crises. She sat staring in front of her, and did not notice her maid's anxious looks or hear the whispers exchanged with the footman outside the door over the coffee-tray.

She was shivering over the fire when she heard Charles Daalgaard's steps coming along the passage ; measured, deliberate, they struck heavily on her ear, a forewarning of defeat. Then she resolved to make a final effort, and rose to meet him ; they faced each other as he came into the room.

Blanche's first sensation was one of dull relief ; it was well she had prepared herself for the worst. He was deadly pale, his narrow eyes as hard as glittering stones ; he breathed quickly as if he had been running : there was a strained smile on his lips.

For a moment he said nothing. She perceived, with a certain composure, that he looked dishevelled and wild ; he was as a rule meticulously neat in his person. He said blankly :—

"I've had a letter. My brother is dead."

The words came like a gust of freezing air. Blanche gripped the back of her chair. She said :—

"When did you hear?"

"This afternoon. I—you were—"

"I have been out all day—" said Blanche mechanically; and then, struggling for a more sympathetic manner, she began:—

"How—how shocking. When did it happen?"

"Many months ago. He was killed."

"Killed?"

Daalgaard drew a letter from his breast-pocket; his hands were shaking so much that he could hardly hold it. He came up to the table and spread the sheets—there were four, closely written in violet ink—under the lamp. He said:—

"You had better read it. It is from Frederica—my sister-in-law."

Blanche took up the top sheet. As she stared down at it she suppressed a sudden hysterical laugh. "It's in Danish!"

He looked at her bleakly. "Of course—I forgot. I will tell you what she says."

As she stood gazing at him she saw his face quiver, and had time to be surprised; she remembered then that he had not seen his brother for some ten or fifteen years. Now he seemed to pull himself together; he said in an unnatural but much steadier tone:—

"I see you are quite bewildered. So was I. I can hardly realise what has happened."

"How was he—killed?"

"Somewhere between Atlanta and the sea—last year."

Blanche stood in silence for a moment or two; then she said feebly:—

"What was he doing?"

"Fighting with the Federal Army. He had become an American citizen."

"I sec—I see. How terrible—were there any children?"

"Two. But this is not what I—it's not important. I—wait a moment. I will try to tell you coherently."

He gave an odd, embarrassed laugh and sat down. Then he raised his head and began to speak in a colourless narrative tone.

"I was not—it has been a shock. But when you haven't seen someone for years—no, that isn't important either. This is what I am trying to tell you." He waited, looked down at his hands and then began again:—

"My brother did not make a large fortune—but he prospered there, in the United States of America."

An icy thrill ran down Blanche's spine. She muttered :—
"But the war?"

"He saw it coming, like everyone else. He had saved enough to buy land and start life in another country. When war broke out he went back to America, leaving his family in Brazil."

"Brazil? Is that where—"

Daalgaard returned to the letter. "The estate—he farmed stock and cereals—seems to me enormous. I don't know—I suppose I shall learn to manage it in time."

"What do you mean? How can—it's not yours?"

"My sister-in-law is returning to Europe. Before Louis joined the Federal Army he arranged to leave the place—it's in Bahia, some sixty kilometres inland from São Salvador—to me, in the event of his death."

Daalgaard stopped with a jerk as if his breath had failed him. He looked at Blanche and they stared at one another without speaking. Blanche put her hand over her eyes.

"Do you mean—you're—"

"I mean that I'm free—" said Daalgaard, his voice suddenly deep and vibrating. There was a pause, and he added, as if to himself :—"I can't believe it—but it's true."

"And—"

"And a man of property—" he interrupted with a strange smile.
"What do you say to that, Mademoiselle?"

Blanche sat down ; she continued to gaze at him speechlessly ; then she said :—"Thank God—" and began to cry.

"You must not do that—" said Daalgaard's shaken voice just above her, "You—do you want me to make a fool of myself?"

"O dear!" said Blanche at last, wiping her eyes, "I am so glad—so happy—but I can't believe it either. Your—your sister-in-law—has she money of her own?"

"A little. But the estate is still hers—I am to pay her rent and a share of the profits. In ten or twelve years I should be able to buy it outright, she tells me. The overseer—wait a moment—she says, 'Reldheim will stay on with you. We have been very happy here—but now it is all over. Louis thought it best that we should not live on here without him—but I think you will care for

it as he did. Come out as soon as you can. He always said it was one of the most beautiful places in the world—but there is nothing more for me here now, and I must make a home for the children near my own people.' ”

He folded up the letter ; then he said in a low voice :—

“I cannot—it seems impossible. I feel as if I’d been hit on the head. I keep thinking that I shall wake up, and—”

“I know—I know—it all seemed so dreadfully dark and hopeless —though I would not admit it—” said Blanche in a muffled voice.

There was a pause. Daalgaard fixed his eyes on the ground and said in a deliberately expressionless tone :—

“Do you—do you think she could be happy in such a place ?”

“Tell me more of it—” said Blanche, putting away her handkerchief and leaning forward.

“I don’t know very much. Bahia—São Salvador—is a big city, and sixty kilometres is not far, according to their standards. Oriana—we shall have to learn Portuguese.” He dropped his face in his hands.

“Tell me—I want to hear everything—” said Blanche after a few minutes’ silence.

He looked up. “You must forgive me—but it has been—”

“I shall want to picture her there, you know.” Blanche went on, trying to smile, “Is it a good climate ?”

“Yes—dry, not too hot. The land rises over terraces of rock. Will she—do you think—”

“I never doubted Oriana’s being happy—anywhere—with you—” said Blanche, regaining all her gentle firmness of tone, “But this is so much more than I could have hoped for. You will be your own master. I think that will make all the difference, to her, as well as to you.”

He got up and walked away, as if the picture of that new life had appeared to him for the first time. Then he said :—

“I wrote to her at once—here is the letter. Will you send it for me—as usual ?”

Blanche stretched out her hand their eyes met, and she said :—“I think we are both thinking the same thing—that the time for these subterfuges is nearly at an end.”

“Yes—it is—” said Daalgaard, looking away ; in the long silence

that followed she became aware that he had not been conscious of his reply.

She was amazed to see his expression almost as reserved and pensive as usual, and Oriana's phrase came back to her—"He's quite well—except for a bit of his mind." The scars of defeat and humiliation were still apparent ; neither hope nor happiness could absolutely obscure them.

CHAPTER 12 *Isolation*

"**A**N undisciplined and passionate disposition," wrote Blanche in her journal, "is capable of rising to great heights, but not often ; it rather inclines to twist round obstacles than to overcome them."

. She drew a line and added, "September 15th, 1865" at the top of the page, then shut and locked the book, a little surprised that there had been time for a disquisition of which this was the final phrase.

Oriana had returned to the Villa within twenty-four hours of receiving the news of Daalgaard's legacy. She slipped out of the Hôtel de Roncesvaulx alone and, travelling all night in a hired chaise, arrived at Marécourt the next morning ; during the late afternoon she spent a couple of hours with Daalgaard ; then Blanche was summoned and the final arrangements were made. The sum of money to be borrowed from Blanche was decided on first, and then the moment of departure. Daalgaard had ascertained that a steamship was sailing for Brazil from a larger port than that nearest the Villa ; so it was agreed that he and Oriana should make their way there by a devious inland route rather than along the coast road, with Arnaud Doche, Oriana's Yssimbault protégé, as coachman ; arriving in the early afternoon, they would embark at once and remain below until the vessel was under way. Doche must be well paid and subsequently protected from his former employer ; Blanche agreed to undertake both these responsibilities.

"So we have only two more days together—" said Oriana, looking at Blanche, and silence fell.

They were sitting in the library. Oriana stared round, as if

suddenly aware of her setting ; she walked up to a niche, one of two on either side of the fire-place, and fingered the huge olive and white Wedgwood vase it contained. Daalgaard remained where he was, gazing at her ; then he glanced at Blanche with a smile of pride and pleasure that seemed to the older woman uncharacteristically free ; all at once she realised what he must have been like before dispossession and illness had drawn the lines of his face into harshness and reserve ; even now he had to hide his feelings with an inflection of teasing irony as he said :—

“I wonder what you will look like without the bric-à-brac as a background.”

Oriana turned with a triumphant smile. “Quite different—you’ll see—” she said, putting her hands behind her. “In fact—” she went on, “I am different already, only you haven’t noticed anything.”

He contemplated her for a moment and then shook his head. “You haven’t changed in the least.”

“O yes, I have.”

“You were told to stay in Paris till you were sent for—immediately you jump into a carriage, and come back here.”

“I wanted to see Blanche—and besides—”

“Well ?”

“How could I have been ready in a few hours ?”

He got up and came towards her. “How many trunks are you taking ?”

“Only one—” said Oriana with a consciously innocent glance. “O dear—don’t you believe me ?”

“Has Mademoiselle seen it ?”

“Yes—she said it was most suitable.”

“What is a suitably sized trunk for a young lady running away to the Brazils ?”

Oriana measured a distance with her hands ; he looked at them gravely. “I find that hard to believe. In another moment you will be telling me you packed it yourself.”

“Well, I did—” said Oriana, turning away ; she seemed a little perturbed.

“She would not let—” Blanche began, and then stopped as she saw the girl’s rising colour.

Daalgaard took Oriana’s hand, trying to see her face. “Have you ever packed anything for yourself before ?”

Oriana shook her head ; between excitement and confusion she was very near tears. Daalgaard made no further attempt to turn her face towards his ; he glanced down at her fingers : they were ringless ; then his look changed. For a moment Blanche saw a shade of the old bitter melancholy creep over his face.

Oriana walked away and sat down. She said in a casual tone :—

“I have been learning to cook.”

“In Paris ?”

“Yes. I was alone almost every evening. That was the time I liked best.”

“Alone ?” repeated Daalgaard, his face darkening, as it generally did when he was reminded of his employer. “I thought—”

“O ! I went to one ball—and twice to the Opera. The rest of the time I was by myself.” Oriana paused, and her reminiscent look changed to one of malicious amusement. “Aymon was quite ridiculous—everyone was laughing at him.”

“What do you mean ?” said Blanche after another silence.

“I heard people talking about it—he’s got a mistress—a ballet-dancer from the Opera. He was very pleased with himself, of course.”

The mockery in her tone was not reflected in Daalgaard’s expression ; he said rather sternly :—

“You did not see her ?”

“Of course I did—he brought her to the house. *I didn’t care.*”

There was another and longer silence ; then Daalgaard said in a low voice :—

“Isn’t that a new departure ?”

“O ! quite—” said Oriana in an indifferent tone. “Old—your cousin—has taught him a great deal.”

He looked quickly at her and began to walk up and down. At last he said in his sardonic manner :—

“A transformation—he’s reverting to type, I suppose.”

“I’m not quite sure what that means—” Oriana replied, “She was dreadfully plain—small and bouncing, with a silly, spotty face. Quite young—only seventeen.”

“A mere child.”

“Well, you needn’t laugh—I shall be nineteen in three weeks’ time.”

“So you will—” said Daalgaard in an altered tone, and their eyes met again. Blanche put in :—

"Is the Comte de Marécourt going to stay on in Paris, then?"

"I shouldn't think so—" said Oriana coolly. "He doesn't like this creature, you see—in fact I heard him tell someone she was a tedious little thing. But it's the fashion to keep an opera-girl—and so, of course—" She leant back in her chair, clasping her hands behind her head. Charles Daalgaard muttered something, and she added with a faint giggle :—

"Her name's Campaspé Kukula—did you ever hear anything so ridiculous?"

Blanche's expression of severity deepened. Daalgaard stopped in his pacing and gave Oriana a look of mingled amusement and exasperation. His shoulders towered over her; she shrank back in pretended alarm. He looked across at Blanche and said :—

"I see you are determined to shock Mademoiselle up to the very last moment you are to spend together."

"I am shocked—" Blanche replied, "but not by Oriana."

Oriana smiled vaguely; her eyes were on Daalgaard's; he sat down beside her and taking her hand again, said in his gently satirical tone :—

"I'm missing a great chance, you know." Oriana made an interrogative sound, and he went on :—"If I had been the hero of one of those novels you read, I should have had to call him out for insulting you."

"That would be very silly—" said Oriana, "Aymon is one of the best swordsmen in France."

"I know. That is why I am not asking him to meet me before we leave."

"You would have the choice of weapons—" said Oriana dreamily, half closing her eyes, as she continued to look at him.

"Not unless he challenged me."

"O ! of course—but suppose he did, what then ?"

"How bloodthirsty you are—then I should choose pistols, though I'm not much of an expert with them either."

There was a pause. "Did you kill many people when you were a soldier?" enquired Oriana lazily.

"You like to imagine it, don't you? I don't know—I should not tell you about it if I had."

Oriana laughed softly. "You have no idea of what you may tell me. Think of the years and years—"

"Better not—I might change my mind—" said Daalgaard inaudibly, his voice shaking a little.

Blanche got up and walked away ; she was no longer embarrassed at being forgotten during such interchanges as these ; but something far removed from this one was in her mind. At the rustle of her dress Oriana and Daalgaard looked up rather dazedly, and she began :—

"I am very much exercised about one thing—do M. and Mme de Roncesvaulx know that you have come back from Paris alone ?"

There was an interval while Oriana seemed to collect herself ; then she said in an uninterested tone :—"They will know—by to-night."

"To-night ?"

"They left for Paris—by train—this morning."

"Before you arrived here ?"

"About an hour later. Jeanne told me."

"Did they know—"

"O ! very likely they've gone off to interfere—as usual—" replied Oriana impatiently. "What does it matter ?"

"Where is your father ?" Blanche pursued.

"Dear me ! at the works here, or in Strasbourg, I suppose—what has that to do with—" Oriana broke off as Daalgaard and Blanche looked at one another. She started up and exclaimed :—

"What is it ? What are you thinking ?—" but he pulled her down beside him, his hand on both of hers.

"There has not been time to tell you—" he said gently. "Someone—one other person here—knows that we mean to run away."

Oriana's eyes widened ; she put her hand over her mouth ; in a few sentences Daalgaard recounted the scene with his cousin. He ended by saying :—

"There is one thing—she can have no idea of how soon it is to be. She still thinks of me as penniless and dependent, so—"

"But she'll tell Aymon ! She'll tell his mother !" Oriana exclaimed, beginning to tremble. "I shouldn't have come back—can't we go to-night ? O ! can't we ?"

He put his arm round her, pressing his hands over hers. "It would be absolute madness—the one way to be followed. As it is, those hours before we sail will seem like an eternity. Now, be

sensible, my darling—" for Oriana was shuddering and clinging to him, her face hidden, "did you think one could carry out this sort of expedition without any anxiety or risk?"

"But it's my fault ! If I hadn't come back till you said—"

"Of course it's not your fault. It's mine, for not telling you about Zoë. But I didn't want to tell you in a letter."

"I know why—you thought I should be jealous—" said Oriana, beginning to cry, "and so I should have been—" she added between her sobs—"I'd like to kill her."

Daalgaard gave Blanche a despairing look and she promptly intervened.

"Control yourself, Oriana. It is possible that Mme de Roncesvaulx has heard some gossip about this dancer, and has decided to investigate it for herself."

Oriana made an effort to stop crying ; then she disengaged herself from Daalgaard's embrace, went over to Blanche and took her hand. "I was frightened—it's difficult not to be afraid when—"

"In any case—" Blanche continued in a kinder tone, "Suppose you did have to put off your journey ? It would only be that—or at the worst, following Captain Daalgaard later on." As Oriana gulped and looked at the ground she added deliberately :—"I promise you this—I shall not leave Marécourt before you do. Either I go alone, after your departure, or with you, to Brazil, if necessary." She concluded, smiling,—"How would you like that ? You would have to put up with me for at least six weeks before I went back to England."

Oriana began to smile ; then her face fell again. "Do you think that is really true ?" she said, turning to Daalgaard.

"Of course it is—" he replied, "but there is one precaution we might take, I think."

"What is that ?"

"Well—it is possible that your husband's family are planning some sort of an alliance against us with your father, supposing, that is, that Zoë has told them what she knows. I should suggest that we try to mislead them in some way."

"How ?"

"We might pretend to quarrel and part company—what do you think ?" to Blanche, with a slightly embarrassed smile.

"It seems to me rather too patent—like Oriana's attacks of illness—" said Blanche after a moment's consideration.

"Suppose I—do you think we could trust Dupuy?"

"What are you thinking of?" demanded Oriana.

"I'm a more likely invalid than you are—" said Daalgaard quickly. "Don't you see? I could pretend to take a toss outside his house, and stay there—ostensibly in bed, and in his care—till it is time to leave. They would be less likely to watch us, then."

"That's a wonderful scheme!"

"What do you think, Mademoiselle?"

"I think Dr Dupuy must be trusted—" said Blanche after a pause.

"Very well, then. Now, Oriana, you must do exactly what Mademoiselle tells you. I shall go now—and see Dupuy some time this evening. That means that I shall not see you again until the day after to-morrow."

"O! but—"

"It will do no harm—and it may make all the difference. Now, it is for you to make up your mind."

Oriana twisted her fingers together. "Do you think we really must? I feel—I'm afraid."

"Afraid to say good-bye for less than twenty-four hours?" said Charles Daalgaard, looking down at her with a faint smile.

There was a long silence.

"Yes—" said Oriana in a whisper.

After an instant's pause he said quietly:—"Very well—let us say no more of it."

"Oriana!" Blanche exclaimed.

"I will do it—I will—" said Oriana hurriedly. "Please—don't be angry with me."

Daalgaard gave Blanche a brief look; then he said, taking Oriana in his arms:—"We won't say good-bye—just good night. Do you remember how we used to look forward to the next day when we were alone here in the summer? This is just the same—only a few more hours."

Oriana said nothing; she let him kiss her and smooth her hair without moving; then she flung her arms round his neck; finally he had to unclasp them; he smiled at Blanche over her bent head and walked quickly from the room.

Without telling Oriana, Blanche sent a servant over to Yssimbault to find out if M. Desmarests was in the neighbourhood. News came back that his exact movements were not known ; it was thought that he had gone to Paris.

A curious feeling of isolation descended upon Blanche for the rest of that day. She spent some hours helping Oriana get ready for her journey ; then there seemed nothing to do but wait for the time to pass. As dusk fell the autumn mists rose from the river and hid the gardens ; there was no wind, no movement in the trees : all sound was muffled and remote.

Oriana and Blanche walked about the terraces for a little while ; then they went indoors. Presently a servant came with the message they had been expecting. Captain Daalgaard had had a fall from his horse and would be incapacitated for several days ; he would be spending the next few nights at the doctor's house in the village, should the Comte de Marécourt return unexpectedly and wish to see him.

Blanche gave Oriana a sleeping-draught and persuaded her to go to bed early. Then she went back to the library and took up the book they had been studying together ; it was a volume of travels in Argentina and Brazil ; only a few pages were given to describing that part of the country which was to be Oriana's destiny, and Blanche re-read them trying to picture her against that far horizon.

It was useless. Grace and beauty, happiness and youth, all shrank to a black dot in the tropical infinity of the unknown : and the viscid green of jungle growth, the burning blue of sky and sea, the white and gold and yellow of a vast stark city washed by Atlantic rollers, seemed to swallow up the fleeting vision of a home. Only these fantastic rooms were real ; she began to wander from one to another, from grotto to ruin, past mirrored arabesques and pagodas ; the painted flowers and birds and monkeys sank away as darkness fell on the long echoing galleries and stole into the empty halls. She looked out, and saw that the mist had risen like a wall ; enclosed, inert, she pressed her forehead against the pane and shut her eyes. It was a long time before she roused herself, and found that silence and loneliness were filling her with depression.

She went upstairs and looked into Oriana's room ; she was lying on her side, her face unformed and childish, in the

shaded light, one bare shoulder hunched up against the pillows ; her breathing was deep and even. Blanche contemplated her with a strange blankness ; then she covered her up, put out the light, and returned to her own room.

Very soon she had said her prayers and was ready for bed. Downstairs, walking through the Villa, she had felt deadly tired ; now she was wide awake : so she banked up the dying fire and tried to read herself to sleep, a procedure which seemed to continue for many hours.

She woke up suddenly to find the lamp still alight and the dawn creeping through the curtains. The room was overheated, and the bed-clothes seemed unbearably heavy. She went to the window and flung it open.

The steaming air came over her face in thick cold waves ; she could almost taste the earthy chill that was sweeping inwards from the gardens. Yet beyond the Villa the fog must have lifted ; otherwise she would not have been able to hear the sound of the breakers driving over the sands.

She tried then to remember what had woken her ; she had been jerked into consciousness by a sudden heavy reverberation. She stole along the corridor and listened at the door of Oriana's room ; there was no noise and no light. She went back to bed and fell asleep immediately.

CHAPTER 13 *The Man of Honour*

BLANCHE spent the greater part of the next day in a state of irritation ; never had she found Oriana more trying, more exhausting, than in these, the last hours they were to spend together. She alternated between peevish complaints that no message or letter had reached her from Daalgaard (in vain Blanche pointed out the useless audacity of such a gesture), ecstasy at the thought of the future and wild impatience to be off and away ; she spoke of freedom and change as if her life had hitherto been spent in a prison : and the older woman's parting lecture on duty and responsibility remained unuttered.

Then suddenly Oriana snapped the thread of anticipation and was silent ; she stopped her feverish pacing and said abruptly :—

“But I know what you are thinking—you think I’m too spoilt and silly to make him happy.”

“It had crossed my mind—” replied Blanche rather drily.

Oriana looked at her. “Of course—but you see, he knows that.” She added in a lower tone :—“We shall make each other miserable, often and often—but it won’t matter. Do you know why ?”

“I should like you to tell me.”

“Because we’re like one person—can you understand that ?”

Blanche looked away. “I understand the words you say—” she said after a pause.

“But you’ve written about people in love, marty, many times.”

“That’s different—” said Blanche sharply.

“But why do you—”

“You should not confuse romance with reality, Oriana—it’s dangerous and wrong.”

“Aren’t your books like real life, then ?”

“They seemed so to me when I wrote them—I never thought about it afterwards.”

“Charles says they’re written from a red-hot imagination and no experience—” remarked Oriana, after a thoughtful pause.

“I dare say he is right—” said Blanche, with an odd, detached recollection of some of her less favourable reviews. “It has been said before.”

Oriana had ceased to listen. She looked at the clock for perhaps the fiftieth time ; in the silence that followed Blanche glanced covertly towards the window ; in half an hour it would be dusk. The logs crashed down upon the hearth ; then the double doors were flung open and Jean Desmarests walked into the room.

For a few minutes he remained perfectly still, his face expressionless, looking from Blanche to Oriana ; then he went up to Blanche and speaking in a distinct, even tone, said :—

“You are to leave for England to-morrow morning. I have given orders for your trunks to be packed.”

Before Blanche could answer Oriana was beside her, gripping her arm. Desmarests turned to his daughter, and went on :—

“You are coming to Yssimbault with me, immediately.”

Oriana began to draw her breath in deep heavy gasps ; Blanche

turned, and seizing her by the shoulders, stared at her as if to convey, without uttering it, an urgent warning ; her arm round her pupil, she faced Desmarests and said in a low voice :—

“What has happened ?”

He looked at her then with an intense and frightful malignity : he smiled ; he said in a tone of stony composure :—

“What you might have known would happen when you became my daughter’s go-between.”

Oriana seemed to become rigid in Blanche’s grasp. Desmarests went on :—

“In order to avert disgrace and scandal M. de Marécourt has done what is expected of a man of honour in such circumstances as these.”

There was a long silence. Blanche tried to speak ; when she opened her mouth no sound came. Desmarests licked his lips, and glancing once more in his daughter’s direction, held out his hand as if to lead her from the room. Oriana leaned stiffly forward, and said in a whisper :—

“Who is it ? Which one ?”

Desmarests paused for a moment, and then said with the same peculiar and ghastly smile :—

“Your—husband—is dying. He does not wish to see you.”

There was another silence. Oriana sprang away from Blanche’s arm and burst into a peal of laughter, so shrill, so piercing, that Blanche clapped her hands over her ears. Oriana snatched them away, and seizing them in her own, thrust her face into Blanche’s ; her eyes glittered, her lips were parted. She said on a fiercely rising note :—

“He’s dead ! He’s dead !”

Blanche shook her off and sank into a chair. She heard Oriana call out Daalgaard’s name, but not the reply. Then she became aware that Jean Desmarests was standing over her. She looked up and saw that he had seized Oriana by the wrist. All at once she realised that she had been muttering over and over again, “What shall I do ?” and that he was answering her.

“You can go down to the doctor’s house in the village. He is still conscious—he wishes to speak to you.”

Blanche got up, staring from the father to the daughter ; long afterwards she remembered that for a moment the expression on

both faces was the same. Oriana was trembling and gasping. Desmarests repeated :—

“Go—go now.”

“But you—Oriana—”

“I am taking my daughter home with me. You can say good-bye to her now.”

“Good-bye ?”

“Yes. You have done enough here. Go.”

Blanche had no idea how the next few moments went by. She had the impression that she had tried to speak to Oriana and that her father intervened : then that Oriana had tried to embrace her and was again withheld. She was still quite stunned and stupid ; as she walked down to the village she was conscious only of the streaming rain on her bare cold hands.

A group of villagers stood round the doctor’s house ; they appeared as awestruck and elated as people generally do who are hoping to witness some portion of a drama in a world other than their own ; and it crossed Blanche’s mind that though they had never liked their young lord, they might pity him and even mourn his loss.

This thought broke up the frozen surface of her mind, and it began to work as usual. The way was now clear. After a suitable interval Oriana, although disgraced and perhaps disinherited, would be able to join Daalgaard as a wife in name as well as in fact ; and though Blanche and others like her might shrink from the man who had thus effected the solution, she at least would be consoled in the knowledge that he had been forced into crime by Aymon de Maré-court’s sudden assumption of an uncharacteristic role.

Then as she came nearer she became aware that the crowd in front of the house was held back from a too intimate scrutiny by a ring of armed men, men of a quite different type from these blue-bloused fishermen and their wives ; they numbered a dozen or more and had an impassive, drilled aspect, such as a company of soldiers might have worn : but they were not in uniform ; one of them made way for Blanche as if she were expected.

She heard a murmur of sympathy and recognition as she passed through them and entered the house. There was no one in the passage or in the low-roofed square little room leading from it ; she

closed her eyes and told herself that she must not swoon or give way until the interview was over. If only she were not required to meet Aymon's father and mother, she could be sure of her self-control ; and this consideration was uppermost in her mind when Dr Dupuy came in.

He paused, and seemed to gaze at her in surprise and shrinking ; he said nothing. Blanche began :—

“I am ready.”

Still he looked at her without answering ; and she added in a firmer tone :—

“Must I—will it be necessary for me to see his parents ?”

There was an instant's silence ; Dupuy's expression changed. Then he said blankly :—

“His parents ? What do you mean ?”

“Are they not here ? Did they not come back from Paris with him ?”

He stepped back a pace or two ; he made a movement with his hand. Then he looked up at Blanche and said gently :—

“M. and Mme de Roncesvaulx are still in Paris, Mademoiselle.”

It was not the words but the alteration in his voice that made Blanche's mouth go dry ; she knew then that he was going to tell her something : trying to escape it, she went on :—

“How is he ? In great pain ?”

Dupuy shook his head ; then he came nearer, and this time it was Blanche who drew away. He began to speak. She called out “No ! No !” as the words barely penetrated her understanding. She felt sick and there was a sour taste in her mouth. She turned and tried to rush from the room.

Now Dupuy was standing between her and the door. She glared at him and saw his look of horrified compassion ; before she could speak or move he laid his thin dry fingers on her wrist.

“Sit down, Mademoiselle. I have something to say to you.”

Blanche believed that she had muttered a refusal ; then she knew that she had not been able to make it heard. She thought “If I say nothing and pretend to listen I shall be able to go away—” and so allowed her companion to guide her to a chair near the hearth. He was standing beside her now, and she smiled to think how easy it was ; she had only to wait a little while, and she could go for ever from this dreary place. He began to speak in a quiet, almost matter-

of-fact tone ; she tried to listen to the sound of the rain on the roof.

"M. de Marécourt is unhurt, and far from here by this time. He came from Paris early this morning. His brother was with him, and a friend, a M. d'Argesson."

Blanche looked at the floor ; she felt her breath coming sharp and hard as if she had been hit on the chest. Dupuy went on :—

"Someone told him that M. Daalgaard was here—he came without warning. The challenge was given, and accepted." He put his hand on Blanche's shoulder, and gripping it firmly, said :—"Then the other two came in, and I accompanied them down to the shore, as soon as it was light. It was all over in a few minutes. M. d'Argesson helped me to carry him back here."

"Him ? Who ?" said Blanche, wrenching her shoulder away and looking up defiantly. "You mean the Comte de Marécourt ?"

Dupuy shook his head ; she turned her face away ; then his voice dropped. "No, Mademoiselle. M. Charles Daalgaard."

Blanche got up. She felt the blood rush over her face ; the sweat began to pour down her. She hardly heard what had been said ; she was conscious of a violent anger. She began to exclaim and mutter under her breath. Dupuy continued :—

"I had no time to let you know what had happened before M. Desmarests arrived. He had this house surrounded and guarded as you see it now. I asked for a nurse—and a priest. Neither was allowed me. M. Desmarests left me alone with my patient and an old village woman." He stopped. Blanche put out her hand and her eyes closed.

Long after that she seemed to come out of a dream. There was a queer sharp smell in the air, and a cold hardness on her lips. She opened her eyes, and saw Dupuy kneeling beside her.

"Drink this, Mademoiselle. You will need all your strength."

Blanche did as she was told ; she coughed and wiped her mouth ; then she buried her face in her hands.

"Do you still feel faint ?"

"No. Please tell me again what has happened."

Dupuy recapitulated his story ; he added in an expressionless voice :—"I suppose M. Desmarests was determined that as little scandal as possible should be attached to his daughter's name. I had no idea that he was going to allow you to come here."

"Oriana ! I must go to her !" Blanche exclaimed, starting up.

"She is on her way to Yssimbault, I believe ?"

"Yes—but—"

"Even if you were to reach her at once, it would be too late—" said the little doctor in his gentle, passionless voice. "He is dying. It may be a matter of minutes."

"I—I can't—"

"He has asked for you. Will you come ?"

Blanche stood still in the middle of the room, her head lowered ; then she said quietly :—

"Yes, of course. Where is he ?"

Dr Dupuy offered the glass he had been holding, but she shook her head. He seemed to consider a moment, and then beckoned her to follow him. They crossed the passage and went into the room on the other side.

By this time it had been dark for more than an hour, and the blinds were drawn. This room was smaller than the other and contained even less furniture. There was a round deal table by the window on which stood a pot of ferns and an hour-glass. At the other end Blanche saw a low camp-bed, a stool and a single upright chair on which sat an old woman in a starched cap and apron, a rosary between her folded hands. The lamp hanging from the ceiling had been heavily shaded ; it threw an ellipse of light at the foot of the bed ; the rest was in shadow.

As Blanche came nearer she saw that Daalgaard had been propped up ; he drew deep snoring breaths ; his eyes were half open. His arms were stretched out in front of him.

Dupuy preceded Blanche, and the old woman got up and withdrew into the shadows ; he slipped his fingers round the bony wrist, dark against the sheet, and released it after a moment or two, his lips tightening a little. He bent down and said in a low distinct voice :—

"Are you in pain ?"

The bloodshot eyes rolled upwards ; there was a muttered answer that Blanche could not hear. The doctor summoned her with a glance and made way ; she sat down by the bedside and took Daalgaard's hand. She looked at it and tried to remember when she had last held it in hers.

A long time passed. Blanche pressed the hand between her

own ; Daalgaard opened his eyes and looked straight at her. She leaned forward.

"Do you know who it is ?"

He answered in a thick muttering voice :—"Have you been here long ?"

Blanche shook her head. Then she saw that his shirt had been slit open over a mass of padding and bandages ; he drew another long rattling breath, and his eyes closed ; his forehead was damp and shiny.

The doctor bent over him again from the other side ; he slid one arm round him and motioned to Blanche to prop the pillows a little higher. Now Daalgaard was sitting almost upright, and he seemed to breathe more easily : his eyes were still shut. The doctor came round to Blanche and whispered :—

"The next haemorrhage will be the last. But he may stay like this for a little while. I shall be in the next room, if you want me."

Blanche nodded, and he went out. She saw then that Daalgaard's eyelids had sunk and that his nostrils were deeply dented, as though in a badly made mask : his nose jutted out thinly. She sat gazing at him for a long time.

Then as she watched a tear burst from beneath his lashes and crept down his cheek ; still he did not move or open his eyes : another tear forced its way between the lines and hollows of his face.

There was an indescribable horror in this speechless grief. She had seen him weep openly once, and once had turned away as his eyes filled in the easy despair of sickness and pain ; but these secret tears, springing from some far place of unconsciousness and dreams, pierced her with a bitter pang ; she leant over him and wiped them away.

A few minutes later he moved a little ; he said in a more distinct and recognisable tone :—

"Is it morning ?"

"No—it is time for you to sleep—" said Blanche, putting back a lock of hair that had fallen across his forehead.

There was a pause. Then he said slowly :— "Dupuy—has he gone ?"

"He is in the next room—shall I fetch him ?"

"No—it was you—I wanted to speak to."

"I am here. I am going to stay with you."

He half smiled, as if he remembered in the firm quiet tone some quality that had once amused him. Then he said :—

"Will Oriana—is she coming soon?"

Blanche had a moment's struggle to answer ; then she replied :—

"Very soon—you must rest, so as to be ready for her."

He said nothing ; it was as if he were slipping away again ; it seemed to Blanche that the strange and merciful indifference of the dying was already upon him. A moment later he murmured :—

"It is you—holding my hand?"

"Yes."

"I thought—she was here for a little while. Will she come back?"

"Yes—very soon."

There was a long silence. Then he tried weakly to move his hand away from hers. She heard the door open and Dupuy re-entered. Now she had released Daalgaard's fingers, and he clenched them as if he were in pain. Suddenly he began to speak with a loud, harsh voice in his own language ; he called out sharply ; the unintelligible words dwindled to a mutter till he looked up and saw the figure of the doctor standing at the foot of the bed ; he frowned and spoke firmly and abruptly, as before.

Dupuy came up to the head of the bed and put his hand on Daalgaard's ; it was jerked away and there was more muttering. Blanche whispered :—"Do you know what he is saying?" and Dupuy answered in the same tone :—"A little—he is still fighting his rear-guard action at Als—don't try to rouse him."

Daalgaard continued to murmur for a minute or two. Then he said in a different voice :—

"What is this—on my chest?"

Dupuy bent down. "You were wounded—by the seashore—do you remember?"

The dying man looked up, and his face changed. "I thought—I was on the islands—" he said, his eyes searching the doctor's face. "Was it this morning?"

"Yes—early this morning."

Daalgaard seemed to be thinking ; then he said :—"It's bad, isn't it? Have I got long?"

The little doctor looked at him and then across the room to the

window. Blanche leant forward and took his hand. "Don't talk—try to rest now—" she said in a whisper.

Daalgaard's eyes were on the doctor's face ; with a look of impatient weariness he said :—

"There's a weight on my chest—can't you move it?"

Dupuy bent down again, a medicine-glass in his hand. "Can you swallow this?"

"It doesn't matter—" said Daalgaard, turning his head away, with the shadow of his old ironic glance. His eyes wandered to Blanche, and he said faintly :—

"Were you there—when it happened?"

"No—I came—"

"I mean—at Als—were you at Als?" .

"That's all over—don't you remember?"

His face lightened and he smiled. He turned his head on the pillow as if he were going to sleep : he murmured something that she could not understand.

Now the sound of the rain had stopped ; Blanche heard footsteps and voices fading down the lane.

Daalgaard began to cough thickly. He looked from Blanche to the doctor, as if for help : his eyes were wide and staring. Blanche put her arm round his shoulders and held him up against her breast. Blood poured from his nose and mouth, over the bandages and the sheets, over his hands. He tried to lean forward ; then his head fell to one side against her arm.

CHAPTER 14 *Cause and Effect*

"I'm not the custom of our firm," said Alfred Marchant, "to grant these requests. But in the case of Miss Peverence—"

"She is a public figure—" said the young man, getting out his notebook and turning over the pages.

"Quite so—and her circumstances call for an exception to the rule."

There was a short silence. Alfred Marchant leaned back and folded his hands. Then he said :—

"I asked you to visit me here and not at our offices because I wished to speak as Miss Peverence's friend rather than as her publisher." He contemplated his visitor for a moment and then went on :—"I have not seen her for nearly a year—to be exact, it is ten months and two weeks since we parted—then, she was living in France."

The young man was writing busily. Alfred Marchant held up his hand.

"One moment, Mr Williams—before we go any further, may I touch on something that is quite personal to myself?"

"Indeed, sir—please continue."

"Is the *Parthenon* in the habit of asking for these interviews, as you term them, from a selected number of well-known authors?"

"No, Mr Marchant—we are generally as—as—"

"Old-fashioned? Don't be afraid of using the word—"

"I was going to say, as careful of innovation as Messrs Marchant. But in this case we feel, with our readers, that Blanche Peverence is a national possession."

"In view of her literary record?"

There was a pause. Mr Williams looked a little uncomfortable. He appeared to be making up his mind.

"Frankly—no. Her past work is, of course, marvellously ingenious and extremely readable. But it is the author of *The Other Side* that we—"

"You mean that your editor has asked for a personal article, simply on the strength of this new novel?"

"Yes."

"And that all her former work counts as nothing as against one short book, written in three months?"

The young man seemed to consider; he began to speak, and then broke off, his colour rising.

"Come, out with it—it's not the author of *Only A Governess* or even of *Miss Herriott*, that concerns your journal?"

"No, sir, it is not. Are you surprised?"

"I am curious. You consider—the *Parthenon* considers—this new style an advance on that of her early novels?"

The journalist paused; then he said deliberately :—

"*The Other Side* is not an advance. Mr Marchant—it is a departure. It might have been written by another hand."

"How is that?"

"Don't you feel it yourself, sir? The simplicity, the realism, above all, the humour—to put it brutally, these were not the qualities which made Miss Peverence's name a household word."

There was another silence. "No—I suppose not—" said Alfred Marchant dryly.

"And then—the subject—" the other went on, "the docks and slums of the greatest city in the world—the other side of imperial wealth and power—I can only say I sat up half the night over it, myself—and—"

"You think everybody else has?"

"Well—haven't they?"

Alfred Marchant paused; his expression was pleasant and sly. "We are not dissatisfied with the sales."

"She knows her background—she doesn't preach and she doesn't moralise. She even contrives that happy ending so that it seems inevitable. I confess I fell in love with that half Italian heroine at once—"

"Carmela—"

"Yes—and the old people—it's wonderful satire—such vision and humour. And then the Dutch hero—the young sailor—"

"He struck you as drawn from the life?"

"No more than the others—but you don't want to hear me repeat what you've read a dozen times."

"My dear Williams, reviews are written by old fellows like me—I want to know what the young people say."

It's great writing, Mr Marchant—it's real."

"Yes—it is real—" said Alfred Marchant thoughtfully; in the ensuing silence he seemed to fall into a dream.

"Won't you tell me, sir, how Miss Peverence gained her experience of that particular world?"

The publisher looked up, rather startled. "Of course—how old are you, by the way?"

"Twenty-four."

"Twenty-four—I see. Well, I have made a few notes for you of Miss Peverence's early life. Did you ever hear of her father—the Reverend William?"

"No, sir—was he well known?"

"Moderately—in his own day. Now, apart from these notes—is there anything else you want to ask me?"

"When is Miss Peverence expected home? Is she living abroad?"

"Yes—she went out to France after the *Miss Herriott* episode—don't bring that up again, by the way—" the young man shook his head impatiently—"to stay with a M. Desmarests, as companion to his daughter, who subsequently married."

"Desmarests—the millionaire?"

"Yes. Miss Peverence remained with Mlle Desmarests after she became the Comtesse de Marécourt, for nearly a year."

"De Marécourt? Didn't he go out to Mexico, nearly a year ago?"

"Yes."

"But—can it be the same? Was he a member of Montholon's staff?"

"He was."

"Then he's dead. Did you not see what happened? It's in this morning's paper."

There was a short silence.

"Dead, is he?" said Alfred Marchant impassively. "Yellow fever, I suppose?"

"No, he was killed in a—wait a moment. Isn't that *The Times* on your desk?" He picked it up and began to turn the pages, "Did you ever meet him?"

"No."

"Then perhaps it's not very—here it is, however. Look."

Alfred Marchant put on his eye-glasses and began to read, half aloud.

"Another blow has been dealt the Imperial Forces in Mexico. An escort of the supply column of Mexican Imperialist troops, commanded by French officers, surrendered to the Juaristas on March the thirtieth. Before the men gave up their arms and supplies they cut the throats of their officers and threw the bodies into the river. Among the victims we note several historic names'—h'm—'Brissac, Cossemain, Mortemart'—here it is—'Marécourt. The Comte de Marécourt, whose death was recently announced, is now believed to have perished in this expedition. The judgement of history—' and so on. This looks like the *coup de grâce* for the egregious Maximilian."

"I wonder if Miss Peverence has heard of it?" said the journalist after another silence.

"I doubt it—she's staying with a friend at Lago di Salpi, near Barletta."

"Has she been long in Italy, then?"

"Since last September, I believe."

"Where—when did she write *The Other Side*?"

"It was sent to me—let me see—in the third week in January. Less than three months' work, as I told you."

"Amazing. How does Miss Peverence take her success?"

"O ! very calmly—she's used to all kinds of praise, you know—" said the publisher with an odd smile.

"Of course—but does she realise that this is different?"

Alfred Marchant stood up.; he was staring out of the window. "I hardly know—between ourselves, Williams, authors are queer fish—ungrateful, unobservant—"

"Unobservant, sir? Surely, Miss Peverence—"

"She lives in her own world."

"She seems to know a good deal about other people's, judging by—"

"She hasn't been near the Surrey docks for seventeen years."

"And all those years, it was forming in her mind—the world she knew best—and first—" said the young man in a low voice.

"I suppose it was."

"And the next book? Perhaps that will have a continental background? Was she on good terms with Desmarests himself?"

"I believe so."

"I wonder if they knew what a prize they had—the others, the family of Marécourt?"

Alfred Marchant was still smiling. "They had read some of her novels—" he said after a moment's silence.

"Now that Mme de Marécourt is widowed—will Miss Peverence rejoin her, do you think?"

"I think she intends to come home."

"Soon?"

"Very soon. That is confidential."

"You mean—she's on her way?"

"Well—yes."

As the young man opened his mouth to exclaim, Alfred Marchant

interrupted him with :—“You shall meet her—one of these days —” and waving aside his thanks, he bade his visitor good-bye and ushered him to the door.

A few moments later Cordelia Marchant returned from her afternoon drive. At dinner Alfred concluded his account of the interview by saying : -

“I very nearly said too much—it would never have done for him to know that we expected her this evening.”

Cordelia said thoughtfully :—“Will she have changed, I wonder?”

“I doubt it.”

“All those terrible experiences—”

“She has had eight months in which to forget—or absorb them.”

Blanche arrived as the tea-tray was brought in ; she was not in the least changed, in manner or appearance. Alfred left her with Cordelia for a little while ; then he and Blanche were alone.

He began by telling her the news of Aymon de Marécourt’s death, which she received calmly and without comment ; there was a great deal to be said on other subjects, and they had been talking for an hour or more before the publisher was able to mention the *Parthenon* article. Blanche appeared a little surprised.

“Isn’t that a new departure, Alfred ? I thought you disapproved—” she broke off with a puzzled look as he laughed shortly.

“It is you who have made the new departure, according to them. I’m merely following your lead.”

Blanche paused before she answered ; then she said abruptly :—

“I learnt a great deal from—in that place.”

“Most of it painful ?” said Marchant gently.

“No—not all.”

“Would you prefer not to talk about it just now ?”

“No, dear Alfred—I wish to speak of it to you. My letters, I know, were quite inadequate.” She waited a moment, and then went on :—“I wrote to you first from Paris, did I not ?”

“Yes.”

“Was Cordelia very anxious ?”

“I told her that you were staying with friends.”

“That was true. The time at the convent seemed endless—and yet, when I left for Italy, I knew that I had been almost happy there.”

"What gave you the notion of going to Sainte Ursule?"

"One of my younger cousins became a postulant there a year ago. We corresponded from time to time—I knew they would take me in."

"Were you converted?" said Alfred Marchant with a smile.

"No—did you expect me to be?"

"Did they?"

"I went there as a patient—not a proselyte—" said Blanche, a shade of reproach in her tone.

"I realise that—we were deeply concerned."

"It was more nervous than organic. I was very grateful to them for their care of me."

"You are completely recovered?"

"O! completely—I was able to start work as soon as I got over the journey."

"Was Honoria—did she—"

"She was tactful and considerate to a degree that I should never have expected. I had the villa to myself most of the time. That was why I dedicated *The Other Side* to her. She was very kind. But I did miss you and Cordelia."

The publisher looked a little embarrassed; he said in a low voice:—

"I blamed myself—I never told you how much I regretted our parting as we did."

There was a pause in which Blanche gazed abstractedly at her friend; then she said mildly:—

"Were you angry with me?"

"Yes—and with myself. If I had known then—"

"How could you? None of us knew—I mean—" she paused, gazing into the fire; then she continued in an altered tone:—

"All that time we were together—the trap was being set and laid. Do you remember—you asked me what Zoë de Freysac was planning, and I—how blind I was. How blind we all were."

There was a long silence. Alfred Marchant waited, looking at Blanche, and presently she went on:—

"It was so incongruous—so horrible. While we—Charles Daalgaard and Oriana and I—were thinking only of the future, they were making an alliance against us. When I first realised that, it

was as if I had seen them all bewitched—and so they were, though not in the literal sense."

"You mean that this woman persuaded de Marécourt to—"

"Not exactly that—I think, in the face of scandal, the family drew together and became ruthless. The duel was plain murder—Aymon de Marécourt must have known that when he agreed to make the challenge."

"Do you think he was forced into it? Your account of him doesn't imply a violent or brutal disposition."

"He was neither. He was unspeakably vain. Between them, his mother, his father-in-law and his—Mme de Freysac—made him see himself not only as the wronged husband, but as the protector of the family honour."

"Are you sure of all this?"

"Quite sure. A letter—a very cruel letter—from Mme de Roncesvaulx, made that absolutely plain."

"What I cannot understand—" said Alfred Marchant after a short silence, "is the attitude of this unfortunate young Dane. Why did he not refuse to fight de Marécourt?"

"I discussed that with Dr Dupuy. I think I told you that we—we spent that last evening together. I asked him the same question. When the doctor protested against his taking up the challenge, the answer was, 'I'm conforming to custom—'. But I think myself it was Oriana's outlook, not the custom of the country, which made it impossible for him to refuse."

"I see. And what must Mme de Freysac have felt when—was she not in love with Daalgaard?"

"Yes, she was. She intended Aymon de Marécourt to wound, not to kill him. Then he and Oriana would have sailed for Mexico, leaving her to nurse her cousin back to health."

"How do you know that?"

"Because she arrived at the doctor's house directly the duel was over. Charles Daalgaard refused to see her—she broke down and told the doctor everything. There was something else too—" Blanche paused, and added very low:—"I am sure that Aymon de Marécourt was not with that expedition. He met his death at her hands—not in the manner generally believed."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because I had a letter from him, asking for news of Oriana—

an extraordinary letter, in the circumstances. He wrote as though we were on the best of terms—but that was characteristic of him. It was from Chapultepec—some hundreds of miles from the supply expedition."

"Was it dated?"

"Yes—the seventeenth of March. It was sent care of Dr Dupuy, and reached me at Barletta just before I started for home."

"Was there any reason why he should have changed his plans?"

"None. He went there as diplomatic attaché, not in any military capacity. It would have taken him more than a fortnight to join the expedition, in any case."

"Did she accompany him to Mexico?"

"She followed him about a month after he sailed."

"Why should she have pursued him in this way?"

"She always despised him—he was not likeable, he was dull and foolish. There must have been times when she hated him. He was a tool—and he broke between her hands."

"But to go all that way—"

"She meant to establish herself in Mexico. She told Dr Dupuy that she would never return to France."

"Do you think he meant to kill Daalgaard?"

"I don't know—his family may have worked upon his jealousy of her to that extent. How can one guess how much he knew or what he meant to do? Perhaps he changed his mind at the last moment—or lost his head."

"Why did he go down to the doctor's house? He could not have known of Daalgaard's plan."

"He came first to the Villa. Only the night-porter knew whom he had come to find, and he, of course, gave the message about the accident. I don't know whether Charles Daalgaard was taken by surprise—but I think he must have known, the moment he saw Aymon de Marécourt, that he would have to meet him."

"He chose the weapons—Daalgaard?"

"Yes—he was shot through the lung."

"How can you be sure that she—that Mme de Freysac—intended her cousin to be so terribly avenged?"

"I can never be sure. I knew that he could not have gone out with that expedition, and that it would have been the easiest thing in the world for her to make it appear that he had."

"I find it hard to believe, I must confess."

"I know—" said Blanche quietly, "you always considered my opinion of Zoë de Freysac over-dramatised, if not inventive."

"It seems absurd for me to pass judgement on a person I've never even seen, but—well—" he stopped, his eyes on Blanche's face.

"Please go on, Alfred."

"You say she was a clever, worldly sort of woman. Yet if what you suspect is true, that she attempted to murder you, and did in fact put de Marécourt out of the way—she must have been as clumsy and violent as a savage."

"She could be extremely violent—on one occasion she behaved like a madwoman."

"You mean, when she threw herself at Daalgaard?"

"Yes. Up to a certain point, she was the sophisticated, cultured grande dame. Beyond that—"

"Even so, why should she have gone to such lengths as you surmise? Anything might have happened to de Marécourt, even if he was not killed by the Juaristas."

"In that case, why should he have been 'believed' to be with that expedition? And his letter—I will show it you—described the life he was leading as perfectly uneventful and humdrum. Chapultepec is hundreds of miles away from the fighting."

"Was she—were they together there?"

"They were living near the palace. Naturally, she was not received by the Empress, who is extremely strict in such matters. But Montholon delighted in her company—this was a source of great pleasure to Aymon de Marécourt—and she was frequently visited by him."

"Do you think perhaps de Marécourt became a fire-eater, and was killed in another duel?"

"It is a possibility—but then we should have heard the truth."

"Nevertheless, I don't think one should assume—"

"I assume nothing, Alfred. I hold no proof and never can, of what I believe."

"Perhaps—" said the publisher, after a pause, "she became like all the others—as far as your influence was concerned."

Blanche looked at him steadily. "So you still believe in that fantastic theory? That I turned a group of ordinary people into a set of characters out of a melodrama?"

"Call it a theory—it's not worth discussing."

"No—I don't think it is—" said Blanche in a tone of severe reproof.

"Did you ever consider your—share—in these tragic events, while you were in Paris, or afterwards, or were you too occupied with your new book?" went on Alfred in a tone of kindly interest.

"I was very ill in Paris—" replied Blanche in the same repressive manner. "Such thoughts as I had there were delirious and visionary. Then—there came the calm after the storm."

"How was that?"

"I mean—" said Blanche in a patient voice, "that exhaustion after an almost complete mental overthrow brought a merciful blankness and indifference of mind. I was very weak."

"Of course—" the publisher murmured, and she went on, as if to herself :—

"It is not for me to speak of these things—but the Hand that subdued the tempest in soul and body still supports me."

"Yes—I see—" said Alfred, looking at her with an expressionless face, and a long silence fell.

Presently he said in a different tone :—

"There is something else I have always wanted to ask you—how did you, in view of your principles and beliefs, envisage this runaway union between Mme de Marécourt and Daalgaard? You must have known that divorce or annulment were uncertain?"

Blanche hesitated ; she seemed to be choosing her words. "My father—"

"My dear Blanche, you must excuse me—but I am asking for your views, not your father's."

"I can only tell you that I was—directed—by him in this matter."

"Directed—"

"I should not care to speak of this, even to justify myself, if I did not owe it to his memory. There was a moment—it passed—when I shrank from what I was doing. I know now, just as I know that he and I will one day meet again, that his spirit strengthened my decision."

"I see—" said Alfred, his voice carefully blank, "you considered this union no adultery, but an—a marriage in the eyes of heaven."

"I should not put it so grandiloquently—" said Blanche, looking up. "Oriana's father had disposed of her just as if she were a piece

in one of his collections. She was under no obligations—and she became a victim, no less."

"What is her position now?" said Alfred after another pause. Blanche looked very grave. "You know—I told you."

"Is she no better?"

"Very little."

"When did you last see her?"

"The day before yesterday—I was at Yssimbault for an hour."

"Did she know you?"

Blanche covered her eyes with her hand; when she replied it was with a remote and gentle sadness. "At one moment I believed she did. There was a flash—she seemed to come back—then—"

"Did she ever realise what had happened?"

"O yes. Her father told her."

Alfred Marchant muttered something unintelligible; Blanche continued with the same grave composure:—

"I always think that if I had been able to break it to her, this would not have happened."

"Does she answer when you speak to her?"

"No. She looks at me as—as if—"

"Dearest Blanche—"

"It is a relief to me to talk of her, Alfred. I think of her so much, you see."

"Does she recognise her servants—the doctors—anyone?"

"No—at least, they think not. They cannot be sure."

"And her father?"

"He is in Paris, or Strasbourg, nearly all the time. He never sees her—his one failure."

"You feel very bitterly about his attitude?"

"He never loved her. But I try not to think of—she would have attached herself to him, if he had allowed it. He is without faith and without affection—a money-making machine."

"You have not met since he took her away?"

"We have corresponded a little—" said Blanche with a certain grimness.

"How is it that he allows you to see his daughter?"

"I know something about him that he is anxious to keep secret—the knowledge came to me through Charles Daalgaard, a week or two before he died."

"I don't understand."

"Captain Daalgaard heard it from his cousin—you remember I told you she had a certain power over M Desmarests, and that none of us knew in what it consisted. It was this which prevented his turning her out of the neighbourhood."

"And it has passed on to you?"

Blanche nodded; there was silence for a moment: then the publisher said in his driest manner:—

"The wheel has come full circle indeed—when you use her weapons."

Blanche received this stricture with the calm that had impressed him in all her behaviour; he looked at her curiously; then she said:—

"I should wash my hands of the whole affair, if it were not that I have a duty towards Oriana."

The words struck Alfred Marchant with a kind of horror; he seemed to be looking into an open grave. He repeated "Duty—" and her quiet voice went on:—

"Yes—I have a feeling that if she ever recovers, it will be through me. I shall continue to visit her every month—oftener, if there is any sign of a change."

"But it may be—"

"She is young and strong—I am sure she will come to herself, when it is time."

"Is that what the doctors say?"

"Not exactly—but it seems to me that shock and despair have driven her into this—blankness—as a refuge. When she is ready, she will come back. Then I must be with her."

"But it might be a question of years before—"

"I know that. But it is my responsibility."

"You mean—because of your influence over her in the past?"

"Partly. And also because I once made myself answerable for her to—" she paused and appeared to collect herself; then she added:—"You know that I was with him when he died?"

"Did he—was he conscious all the time?"

"I don't know. There was very little pain—at the end, none at all. He knew me—almost at once."

"Was he expecting her, when you arrived?"

"On the surface of his mind, I think he was. He spoke of her

twice. Then he became confused. At one moment he seemed to know that he was dying."

Blanche closed her eyes. Alfred Marchant saw that she had become very pale. He got up and stood by the mantelpiece, looking down at her.

"How old was he?"

"Thirty-five—" said Blanche in a steadier tone. She went on :— "Afterwards—when I went in to see him—he was quite changed. I sat there for a long time, looking at him. I had to tell myself over and over again that he was lying there, dead—that I should never hear him speak again." She paused, and then added in a cold harsh voice :—

"There is nothing ennobling or peaceful about such a death. I was looking at a queer, dreadful waxwork figure. The outlines were his—that was all."

"I wish I could have been there to help you, my poor friend."

"Dear Alfred—I thought of you, and of Cordelia and the children. The life here seemed nearer and more real than that little room with the drawn blinds, and the rain streaming down the window-pane. It was so dark and cold." She looked down at her folded hands. "He was buried the next night in the churchyard by the seashore. Dr Dupuy looked after everything. He is still living in the village."

"And no enquiries were made?"

"Everybody knew the facts. There was a form of inquest the next day, and statements were made and signed by the doctor and myself. Then I went on to Paris. I don't know what steps were taken, if any, to pursue Aymon de Marécourt."

"Do you suppose that he was censured?"

"According to the traditions he had revived, he was within his rights—and he could rely on his father-in-law to support him."

"Did he intend to return?"

"After an interval abroad I have not the least doubt that he meant to come back and take up life as usual."

"It's a horrible story."

Blanche made no answer. Presently he went on :—

"How was it that Desmarests was able to imprison Dupuy in his own house?"

"He surrounded it with the men he employs to break up strikes in his factory—a sort of unofficial bodyguard of his own."

"They were ready—waiting?"

"Everything was prepared. M. Desmarests saw to that himself."

"It's inconceivable—"

"What is?"

"That one man should hold the powers of life and death—even in that corrupt society."

Again Blanche did not reply ; she was still looking at her interlocked fingers as if they reminded her of something. Then she said in an odd, cold voice :—

"He died in my arms—I never told you that, did I?"

Alfred Marchant came towards her. She got up quickly and hid her face in her hands. Then she began to weep. He did not move or speak, but stood looking at her. Presently her sobs became less convulsive : he took her hand ; soon she was able to look at him and thank him for his kindness. They said good night, and Blanche went upstairs.

A week later Blanche received two telegraphic messages from Yssimbault. The first was garbled and almost incomprehensible, as if it had been dictated by a servant, but the words "serious accident—come at once" emerged. The second was from Jean Desmarests in English and ran : "All well—no need for your presence."

Blanche decided to ignore the second message. That same evening, soon after midnight, she was again in France and on her way to the island.

CHAPTER 15 *The Happy Ending*

THE weather was stormy and the crossing a very bad one. It might have been possible to hire a chaise and go straight on to Yssimbault, arriving in the early hours of the morning at the Castle, but Blanche did not attempt it. She was completely exhausted ; both sensibility and imagination were numbed by sea-sickness and

fatigue ; she therefore arranged to start at six o'clock the next morning, so as to reach Yssimbault by breakfast-time.

When she reached the village it was quiet and nearly empty. The wind was still very high, and most of the fishermen were busy mending their nets indoors. Soon it became apparent that the ferry was on the wrong side of the tossing water that lay between Blanche and her destination ; it was too rough to set out in a fishing-boat : she would have to wait till the tide went down, and then cross on foot by the causeway.

This unexpected delay threw her into a madness of suspense ; she looked back on her few hours' rest as a piece of blind sluggishness and stupidity. She put no faith in Desmarest's "All well", for he had proved himself capable of the most unscrupulous deceit. She was quite sure that some shock had woken Oriana to a full and unbearable realisation, and that she had never been more in need of help than at this moment. Heedless of wind and spray, Blanche paced along the shore, following the tide ; she waded ankle-deep through the receding water until she reached the jetty.

She was then faced with the climb up to the Castle ; there was no one to meet her, naturally, and such of the villagers as she was able to speak to, turned aside from her entreaties with surly mutterings ; one old woman made an unintelligible but threatening speech ; the thick accent of the district obscured it almost entirely, but Blanche gathered that she was considered to have no business at Yssimbault, as her pupil no longer needed her attentions.

There was no one to help ; so she went on doggedly, alone. When at last, dishevelled and breathless, she reached the foot of the great double doors and looked up, a sick fear came upon her. The Castle windows were shuttered and blank ; it then occurred to her that a change in Oriana's condition might have necessitated her removal to Paris, or elsewhere. She steadied herself, trudged upwards and rang the bell.

When the doors were flung open Blanche was leaning against the balustrade. The manservant made a movement to shut them again as soon as he saw who it was. Then a familiar figure appeared behind him ; he made way for Mme Relain.

The peculiar, nightmarish sensation of reappearance and repetition, of playing a part without the remotest recollection of a single phrase, struck Blanche into silence. She moved forward as

if she had been directed to do so ; but the other woman said nothing, nor did she speak as they faced one another inside the walls.

The cool gleam of marble and alabaster stretched away to right and left as Blanche remembered it ; only now there was no torch-light, no warmth, nothing but a grey unlit space beyond the dark solid shape of Mme Relain.

Suddenly Blanche felt as if she were stifling ; she tore off scarf and hood and gasped out Oriana's name. Mme Relain looked at her ; then she put her hand underneath Blanche's arm and led her along the passage.

The room they came into was one leading to the library, a small octagonal chamber that had been delegated to the housekeeper when she inhabited the Castle. The stove still glowed a little, spreading a faint even warmth. Mme Relain drew Blanche towards a chair and forced her to sit down. Then she said :—

“Why have you come back, Mademoiselle ?”

“To see Oriana—” said Blanche, looking desperately at the door, “You cannot forbid it—neither can her father.”

Having got out these words, Blanche found herself breathless. She rose unsteadily and tried to move past Mme Relain ; but now the tall black figure stood between her and the door and she was too bewildered to persist. Then the housekeeper said gently :—

“Have you had anything to eat ? How did you get here ?”

“I walked from the village—I had to wait for the tide—” said Blanche, after another struggle for breath.

Mme Relain folded her hands. “I think you should take something.”

“I will—thank you—” said Blanche, whose composure was now beginning to return, “Only—first—I must see her. Please tell me—how is she ?”

Mme Relain paused ; then she took Blanche's hand.

“I was sent for last night—” she said, “They had not found her till then.”

“Found—”

“She got out of her room some time during the early morning the day before yesterday. They searched all that day—and in the late afternoon they found her.”

Blanche was silent. She felt that she had reached the end of a

long and difficult task ; her mind was blank and light, as if a wind had blown through it.

"Is she dead?"

The voice was hers ; it was high and clear. She listened for the echo. It came.

"She is dead. She was drowned."

Dead. Drowned. Now the echoes were hollow and abrupt. She swayed and rocked, seeming to lean far out and down over a gulf. The voice rose again, with a harder, deeper intonation.

"It was as if she had woken from a long sleep. She came back—she knew where she was."

Now Blanche's understanding returned ; she put out her hands ; the other woman grasped them in hers. She bent her head ; Mme Relain went on speaking.

"She remembered nothing—except that she was going away. Her father promised that she should go when she had slept a little. She seemed quite content. In the morning she was gone."

"Gone—where?"

"Down to the seashore. Her shoes were washed up on the rocks, below the jetty."

Blanche began to tremble from head to foot ; she was dimly surprised that she could not control this shaking ; again her mind seemed to withdraw itself from her body.

"How long was it—before—"

That was her own voice again ; the reply came quickly.

"Mademoiselle, she could have known nothing—she must have fallen, striking her head. Before she regained consciousness the waves came over her and washed her away."

"But she came back—she's here?"

There was a short silence ; then Mme Relain said :—

"Yes. She was found on the shore as the tide went down. She was happy. She knew nothing."

She moved to a table near Blanche ; there was a tinkling sound. "Please drink this. You look very ill."

Blanche took the glass of wine and poured it down her throat. She was still trembling, but not violently. She looked down at her stained dress and rubbed it with her wet hand. She said :—

"Where is she?"

"In the chapel—but—I am afraid—"

"I must go to her."

"Please take some more of this, Mademoiselle—you—"

Blanche put her hands behind her; she looked at the dark heavy face, and shook her head.

Mme Relain pressed her fingers over her eyes; she said indistinctly :—

"M. Desmarests may be with her—he—will you wait here, while I go and see?"

The gale was still pressing against the walls as Blanche walked up the narrow aisle of the chapel. She was alone. The air was heavy with the scent of lilies and incense. The pictures and statues seemed to tremble and shrink in the shadows. The flames from the tall candles round a central bank of flowers and ferns wavered and steadied themselves again as the draught that had crept in with Blanche sank down and the door closed behind her.

She went up to the mound of living white and green. Within it, her hands and face warm against the metallic shimmer of her wedding gown, lay the brilliant image of Oriana. Her black curls were banded over her forehead, her lips and cheeks faintly tinted with crimson and with rose.

Exotic, insolent, artificially rare, her beauty displayed itself as in life; her lips were parted: and in that smile of conscious power there seemed to lie the rejection of all that she had ever known of ruined love and passionate despair.

Blanche came nearer and stooped over the bier. Oriana's hands were bare, except for her wedding ring; the thick gold band had sunk a little into the flesh. The great diamond necklace that had been her father's marriage gift gleamed on her bosom; in the tremulous dusky light it seemed to move gently with her even breaths. There were diamonds in her hair and in her ears; these could be removed and put away when the coffin was closed down: but she must be buried with her wedding ring on her finger.

Blanche turned away her eyes. She was not now concerned to know whether Oriana had run out of the Castle and down over the rocks to meet the shadowy figure of Daalgaard, or whether, suddenly aware of loss and misery, she had turned to self-destruction in the enfolding waves. She only knew that the dead girl's strangely triumphant look recalled their first meeting; but the memory did

not last. Oriana floated across the caverns of recollection as if in a vacuum. All that she had been was there, lying beneath jewels and silver lace, banked up with the products of the orchid-house and the trappings of the undertaker's parlour ; complete, inexorable, the picture of death remained, blocking out the past.

Then she remembered the hoarse, cooing voice, the bursts of shrill laughter, the childish greed, the insinuating cajolery that made the difference between this still presentment and the vivid creature she had known so well ; mannerisms, glances, gestures, all came back and memory rose as if to perpetuate the enigma ; yet surely there must be some link between the recollection and the reality. She looked again, and saw none. She felt nothing but a drear cold emptiness of mind.

She knelt down and repeated, without any personal or specific application, the first phrases of the Lord's Prayer. Then the dead face faded from her sight. The roar of the sea, the beating of the wind, the black draperies and heavy white flowers sank away also.

Incapable of irony or analysis, her fancy directed by a singularly ingenuous faith, Blanche told herself that her understanding had not, hitherto, been able to grasp perfection or to conceive of a climax other than that she had originally intended ; now, with tears of unspeakable gratitude, she recognised the work of a greater hand. Charles Daalgaard and Oriana de Marécourt were at last inseparably one ; yet she must claim no more than a share in the accomplishment of their happy ending. Their bodies lay quiescent and apart : her peculiar and creative vision saw them move hand in hand through streams and fields of summer to where the outlines of a baroque palace swept upwards to its crystal dome.

THE END

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